SOPHOCLES

OEDIPUS THE KING

Introduction
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GREEK TRAGEDY



INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter of his book **Tragedy and Philosophy** Walter Kaufmann writes :

> Western philosophy was born early in the sixth century B.C., and tragedy less than a hundred years later. These dates suggest rather misleadingly that philosophy is the older of the two. But sixth-century philosophy was very different from fourth-century philosophy, and the two fourth-century philosophers who dealt at length with tragedy, Plato and Aristotle, wrote their treatises after the major tragic poets were dead. The ancients dated writers not by the year in which they were born but by the year in which they flourished : by that token, philosophy is younger. Nor did the two greatest Greek philosophers merely come after the greatest tragedians; their kind of philosophy was shaped in part by the development of tragedy. The evolution that led from Aeschylus to Sophocles and Euripides was in a sense continued by Plato.(1)

Walter Kaufmann, **Tragedy and Philosophy** (New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 1-2.

Whether tragedy preceded or followed philosophy, Kaufmann's argument points to the organic relationship between tragedy and philosophy. In the following pages we will attempt to illustrate this relationship through two great figures in Greek thought, the one a tragedian and the other a philosopher, namely Sophocles and Aristotle as a typical case in point and as a perfect model of the harmonious and organic relationship between tragedy and philosophy. We have chosen to concentrate on the most famous texts of the two leading figures : Sophocles' **Oedipus the King** and Aristotle's **Poetics.**

As is generally the case in Greek tragedy, **Oedipus the King** is based on a Greek myth. The myth which underlies Sophocles' play is known as the 'Theban Legend.'(2) The first question that should be raised is :

How did Sophocles bridge the gap between the original myth and his own vision as embodied in the play ?

In other words, how did Sophocles appropriate the myth ?

One of the definitions of myth is :

> Myth is thought to express the absolute truth because it narrates a sacred history that is a transhuman

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2. See pp. 33-34.

> revelation which took place in the holy time of the beginnings. Being sacred, the myth becomes exemplary and, consequently, repeatable. For it serves as a model and, by the same token, as a justification for all human actions. In other words, a myth is a true history of what came to pass at the beginning of time and one which provides the pattern for human behavior. In imitating the exemplary acts of a god or of a mythic hero, or simply by recounting their adventures, the man of an archaic society detaches himself from profane time and magically reenters Great Time, the sacred time.(3)

Myth, in this sense, played the essential role in the formulation of consciousnes in ancient Greece as it constituted a cosmological **Weltanschauung.** The origin of the myth as a cosmological **Weltanschauung** corresponded to the rise of scientific thought in the sense of primitive knowledge which originated from labour as a means of mastering the world. At this early phase of human civilization man's primitive scientific thought — in the sense of appropriating the world — was mythically oriented and the core of this mythical thinking was man's belief in the power of fate over man that deeply penetrated man's unconsciousness.

3. Mircea Eliade, **Myth, Dreams and Mysteries** (Lodon : Collins, 1976), p. 23.

And that is why myth cou'd be interpreted as the major component of unconsciousness. Consequently, belief in fate could be considered as a major obstacle to consciousness.

In this sense, **Oedipus the King** can be regarded as Sophocles' response to the myth or, in broader terms, as the response of tragedy to unconsciousness as incorporated in the myth, by presenting man's confrontation with fate. In this sense, the pivotal theme of **Oedipus the King** can be interpreted as that of transcendence, that is, the possibility of surpassing the existing social order as an illusion. This is made clear in the words of the Chorus at the end of the play :

> Show me the man whose happiness was anything more than illusion
> Followed by disillusion.(4)

The illusory nature of the quest for transcendence as presented by Sophocles in **Oedipus the King**, is emphasized through the conflict between consciousness (i.e. logos) and unconsciousness i.e. mythos), or free will and determinism incorporated in fate. This conflict is dramatically represented by the characters' challenge of fate as mediated by the oracle, Oedipus, and before him Lauis and Jocasta. This conflict is settled with the triumph

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4. Sophocles, **The Theban Plays** (trans.) E.F. Watling (London Penguin, 1963), p. 59.

of unconsciousness over consciousness, that is, triumph of myth and fate over logos and free will. This solution of the conflict is a clear denial of man's ability to master his fate. It also demonstrates the unity of nature and society through the myth. This is generally exemplified in Greek poetry and more particularly in Greek tragedy:

> The first religious poet, Hesiod, states in simple form his conviction that the course of Nature is anything but careless of right and wrong. He tells us that men do justice, and do not go aside from the straight path of right, their city flourishes, and they are free from war and famine. For them the earth brings forth food in plenty, and on the hills the oak bears acorns at the top and bees in the middle. This is a clear statement that there is a sympathetic relation between human conduct and the behaviour of Nature: if man keeps straight upon his path of right, then her orderly processes of seed-time and harvest will go forward too, and reward justice with the fruits of the earth. So, on the other hand, when a sin has been committed -- such as the unconscious incest of Oedipus -- all Nature is poisoned by the offence of man.(5)

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5. F. M. Cornford, **From Religion to Philosophy** (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1957), p. 5.

This unity of nature and society is governed by the natural law called "Moira" or fate. The violation of this natural law, however, is a moral issue which deserves a moral punishment. Though the violation is moral, it has natural conseauences, that is physical as well as environmental results, e.g. Oedipus' blinding and Jocasta's suicide, on one hand, and barrenness and sickness in the town, on the other. Brian Vickers observes:

> Expulsion from society in fourth-century Athens was reserved for three crimes, murder, sacrilege and incest. these social and religious attitudes are fundamental to, are indeed given their most concentrated expression in, the long concluding section of the play **(King Oedipus)**... The triumph of this last section is that each of them (Jocasta and Oedipus) asserts their own personal, individual moral feelings... Sophocles' Oedipus needs no external moral evaluation of his acts: he is both judge and executioner.(6)

Despite some slight dislocations between the myth and the chronology of the play, which Vickers so meticulously lists in his book, the fact remains that what Sophocles is so careful to assert through his tragedy is the unified idea of determinism and free will in relation to fate.

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6. Brian Vickers, **Towards Greek Tragedy** (London : Longman, 1979), p. 268.

One of the key questions one should ask at that stage of analysis is :

Why does Aristotle regard **Oedipus the King** as a masterpiece and uses it throughout his **Poetics** as a model to demonstrate his theory of tragedy ?

The reason behind Aristotle's favouring of **Oedipus the King,** to my mind, lies in the link between philosophy and tragedy or, to be more accurate, in Aristotle's own philosophy, particularly in his **Metaphysics,** and his literary theory contained in the **Poetics.** The keywords to this link are 'essence" and "imitation" In chapter VII of **Metaphysics,** Aristotle writes about "being" or, in contemporary terms, "identity" :

> There are many ways in which the term "being" is used... On the one hand, it indicates what a thing is and that it is this particular thing; on the other, it indicates a thing's quality or size, or whatever else is asserted of it in this way. Although "being" is used in all these ways, clearly the primary kind of being is what a thing is; for it is this that indicates substance... So what is primarily — not in the sense of being something, but of just quite simply **being** — is substance... There are four chief ways, if not more, in which we speak of substance. In the case of any particular thing, the essence, the universal, and the

genus are all thought of as being its substance; and, fourthly, so is the substratum. Substance is... what is not asserted of any substratum, but rather that of which other things are asserted. The essence of each thing is what it is said to be in itself. Your essence is what you are of yourself... The individual and the essence, then, are one and the same thing... everything that is substance comes together according to nature and by nature; and so substance would seem to be this "nature", which is not an element but a first principle.(7)

About "imitation" Aristotle writes in his **Poetics**:

> Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in one nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated... Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature.(8)

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7 Aristotle, **Metaphysics,** Book VII, Renford Bambrough (edit) **The Philosophy of Aristotle** (New York : New American Library, 1963), pp. 80-103.

8 Aristotle, **Poetics,** Ch. IV, S.H. Butcher (edit.) **Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art** (New York : Dover Publications, Inc. 1951), p. 15.

The close link between "essence" and "imitation" is quite obvious. Having defined "being" as "essence" in **Metaphysics**, Aristotle conceives of poetry as imitation in the sense of a response to a natural need of man as one of man's basic functions. In other words he regards imitation as an instinctual drive in man and an essential concomitant of his ontological being. Hence Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy :

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.(9)

Interpreted within the framework of 'essence", "imitation", according to Aristotle, is the imitation of nature. Nature, as Aristotle conceives it, comprises natural phenomena as well as human nature. And the main characteristic feature of that nature is its permanence. Hence poetry is a copy of this unchageable nature. Imitation in that sense is, therefore, the antithesis of creation since imitation is considered as a natural instinct and function of man. That is, as an essential feature of man's sta-

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9. Aristotle, **Poetics**, Ch. IV, **ed. cit.**, p. 23.

gnant and fixed human nature due to its aprioristic imitative nature. In that sense. Aristotle places poetry among the natural phenomena. That is, as an act connected with the natural needs and functions of man. Consequently, Aristotle identifies imitation with passive copying of nature. In this sense art becomes the perception of a past perception, i.e. copying the past without creation, but mere remembering of past perception. The result is the elimination of one of the most important parts of man, namely the future, because Aristotle's philosophy is based on the idea of "essence" as unchageable and repeatable.

This interpretation of imitation is confirmed by Aristotle's own theory about the autonomy of art which he expresses in the terms "law of probalility or necessity" as the principle governing the work of art. This artistic inevitability corresponds to Aristotle's philosophical determinism expressed in his idea of "essence". In that connection one could say that the notion of imitation is the literary equivalent of the philosophic concept of essence.

From Aristotle's concept of imitation in the **Poetics,** most critics and Aristotelian scholars concentrate on developing a theory of literary form and structure by discussing problems of form such as "the relation between art as pattern and art as knowledge", or "th difference between art and craft", or again "the relation between poetry and history" and last but not least

the idea of "catharsis".(10) In my opinion, this critical approach to the **Poetics** can only raise pseudo-problems because it only tackles the results of a theory and ignores the origins. The reason is an initial dichotomy between philosophy and literature as two distinct and separate disciplines. As R. Bambrough rightly observes, the "Poetics has naturally attracted more attention from those whose primary concern is with literature than from students of Aristotle's philosophical thought."(11) The only remedy to this state of mutual alienation of philosophy and literature is to tackle Aristotle's **Poetics** within the context of his general philosophical system. That is, by establishing the tight amalgamation of the **Poetics** and **Metaphysics**, and by proceeding from the conviction that Aristotle's theory of tragedy cannot be understood without his philosohy of "essence" because both are mutually illuminating.

Proceeding from this unity of philosophy and tragedy, one can claim that the philosophical meaning of "imitation" is the preservation of "essence" through the maintainance of the order, both cosmic and social. From this angle the notion of "catharsis"

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10. The most prominent critics in that connection are: E. Auerbach, **Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature** (Princeton: University of Princetion Press, 1953); Abraham, **The Mirror and the Lamp**; David Daichess, **Critical Approaches to Literature** (London : Longmans, 1967).
11. R. Bambrough, **op. cit.**, p. 410.

can also be interpreted. Proceeding from Aristotle's famous sentence that is usually quoted as "Man is by nature a political animal", or "zoon politikon", which implies that man is essentially a rational being, the telos of tragedy would be to establish the equilibrium between man's reason nd passion through catharsis. The impact of the passions of pity and fear on man's essence is to paralyse the efficacy of passion so that man continues to be rational. Through the purgation of passion, which is a distortion of man's essence as a rational being, man is restored to reason by the release of the excessive emotions through exciting pity and fear. The elimination of the activity of passion through the exclusion of the irrational element in man, in a passive way leads to rationality. This process is passive because it preserves the status quo and helps man continue as an adaptive creature to the "status quo" instead of guiding him towards transcendence to the "pro quo". Hence, the social function of tragedy in the Aristotelian sense would be the weakening of consciousness by using guilt and sacrifice, which are responded to by the emotions of pity and fear, as elements in realizing the weakening of consciousness with the purpose of sustaining the status quo.

We can now interpret Aristotle's argument of the autonomy of art after having established the close affinity between Aristotle's philosophy and his **Poetics.** Having assigned for literature the role of imitation as being its essence, Aristotle elevates tragedy to the level of an absolute. By absolutizing

literature Aristotle denies it any capacity to influence reality. For him literature stands in isolation from reality and only represents relations between beings with the intention of fixing the present condition of man instead of surpassing it. Having overlooked social consciousness as an important element in the social function of drama, Aristotle concentrates on harmonizing people's emotions, reconciling them to their lot and fixing the social conditions after turning them into an absolute.

The predominance of 'essence" is again observed in Aristotle's definition of tragic hero :

> There remains, then, the character between these two extremes, — that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous, — a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.(12)

This definition corresponds verbatum to the character of Oedipus who is the tragic hero par excellence. Trying hard to escape fate though he may, he always ends up by being caught in the web of fate by his very own errors. His main error, as a matter of fact, lies in his very act of caution which helps bring about his

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12. Aristotle, **Poetics,** Ch. XIII, **ed. cit.,** p. 45.

final doom because it expresses a challenge to the will of fate. Being essentially an erring "being", as pre-ordained by fate, he must submit to fate's categorial imperative. Moreover, the irony of the whole matter is that due to and inspite of his "essence", Oedipus is driven to his tragic downfall.

The above elaborations of the link between philosophy and tragedy, through the key concepts "essence" and "imitation" clarify Aristotle's reason for rating **Oedipus the King** as a masterpiece. The link between **Metaphysics** and **Poetics** and **Oedipus the King** can be seen if we regard the idea of essence as the philosophical counterpart of the myth which Sophocles' tragedy encapsulates in the riddle of the Sphinx and which Oedipus solves, thus unwittingly committing the unforgivable sin of objecting to the will of fate. By solving the riddle, which is meant to be a challenge to man because it is unanswerable having no cause, Oedipus sets himself the impossible task of finding a new alternative path other than the one preordained by fate. But due to the aprioristic limitation of man's knowledge and the finitude of human reason, the riddle remains beyond man's reach. The real tragedy of Oedipus is his attempt to liberate man from the tyranny of fate by unwittingly trying to de-mythologize reason. This is of course precarious to the Greek world order because it is a direct threat to the "polis" or the city-state. This is clearly indicated by Teiresias to Oedipus :

TEIRESIAS Were you not famed for skill at solving riddles ?

OEDIPUS : You taunt me with the gift that is my greatness ?

TEIRESIAS : Your great misfortune, and your ruin. (p. 38)

Hence Oedipus had to be tamed and by incriminating his acts, legitimization of myth could be achieved and once more fate could be absolutized which Oedipus, in his tyrannical pride, thought could challenge and defeat. In this challenge Sophocles shows Oedipus against himself by unwittingly erring in his pursuit of his identity. This is expressed by Teiresias' penetrating remark at the beginning of the play : "Your enemy is yourself. (p. 36) Therefore, to restore law and order the sinful Oedipus undertakes to inflict the rightful punishment on himself. His self-blinding is an implicit admission that wisdom is only for the gods and what man can hope for is only love of wisdom. This is confirmed by the Chorus :

All secrets of earth are known to Zeus and Apollo;
But of mortal prophets, that one knows more than another
No man can surely say wisdom is given
To all in their several degrees. (p. 39)

Having angered the gods, who are themselves subject to fate, by defying fate, Oedipus becomes godless and is deserted by the gods. At the end of the play he announces:

> Hated of gods, no man so damned.
> ... ...
> Godless and child of shame,
> ... ...
> No god will speak for me. (pp. 63-68)

The infamy that Oedipus committed was to search for his identity, i.e. his essence, not as an individual but rather as genus. In this pursuit he assumed the stature of the gods by defying fate. For man to become god and defy fate, as incarnated in the oracle, would mean the total collapse of the whole of religious belief. Hence, the Chorus proclaim towards the end of the play:

> Pride breeds the Tyrant;
> ... ...
> Who walks his own high-handed way, disdaining
> True righteousness and holy ornament;
> Who falsely wins, all sacred things profaning;
> Shall he escape his doomed pride's punishment?
> ... ...
> There is no godliness in all makind. (pp. 49-50)

Hence the end of **Oedipus the King** is a sacralization of the

profane, or a restoration of the sacred which was profaned by Oedipus, restoring thus the disrupted cosmic order. According to Durkheim, who considers religion as a social phenomenon proceeding from his sociological and anthropological analyses of primitive societies, the phenomenon of the sacred is a sublimation of the social order. In other words, he considers society with its customs and traditions as an earthly substitute for the absolutized sacred. In this sense society is a sacralization of the profane in the sense of turning the profane, i.e. daily life practices, into an absolute, sacred imperatives by imposing specific moral interdictions. Durkheim writes about the phenomenon of the sacred being created by society :

> In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its mebers it is what a god is to his worshippers. In fact, a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend. Whether it be a conscious personality, such as Zeus or Jahveh, or merely abstract forces such as those in play in totemis, the worshipper, in the one case as in the other, believes himself held to certain manners of acting which are imposed upon him by the nature of the sacred principle with which he feels that he is in communion. Now society also gives us the senta-

> tion of a perpetual depedence. Since it has a nature which is peculiar to itself and different from our individual nature, it pursues ends which are likewise special to it; but, as it cannot attain them except through or intermediacy, it imperiously demands our aid. It requires that, forgetful of our own interests, we make ourselves its servitors, and it submits us to every sort of inconvenience, privation and sacrifice, without which social life would be impossible. It is because of this that at every instant we are obliged to submit ourselves to rules of conduct and of thought which we have neither made or desired, and which are sometimes even contrary to our most fundamental inclinations and instincts.(13)

This is exactly what happens at the end of **Oedipus the King**. Through the sacrificial self-blinding of Oedipus, Sophocles settles the conflict between man and society, in its deified sense, in the interest of that society.

What is the meaning of that end ?

The end, which is the raison d'être of the tragedy, is So-

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13. Emile Durkheim, **The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life** (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1976), pp. 206-207.

phocles' answer to the eternal question of man versus the power of natural forces. In this sense, **Oedipus the King** can be considered as the embodiment of the mythical **Weltanschauung** which is objectified by the myth. By adopting the myth, which is of a religious and conservative nature, Sophocles establishes his stance towards the status quo. Being a man "devoted to the service of the state in art and public affairs",(14) Sophocles uses tragedy as a means to stagnate, not change, reality by preserving the myth which is the cultural legitimization of the Greek cosmic order. Therefore, the conflict between mythos and logos, represented in the episode of the riddle of the Sphinx, is settled at the expense of logos. By preserving mythos, Sophocles proclaims it synymous with essence in the Aristotelian sense. However, if Sophocles had intended to change reality he would have adopted a different approach to essence, namely as chageable by de-mythologizing essence through the elimination of mythos. This, however, necessitates a qualitatively different world outlook, a scientific **Weltanschauung**, which replaces the absolute by the relative and mythos by logos.

Sixteen centuries later, Freud tried to provide a scientific analysis of the mythical **Weltanschauung** through psychoanalysis. Freudian psychoanalysis depends on cosmology which is exemplified in mythos. The central myth used by Freud is that of Oedipus, as an ideal expression of the mythical **Weltanschauung**,

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14. E.F. Watling Introduction, **The Theban Plays, ed.** cit., p. 7.

being based on fate as the essence of mythos and a strong belief in invisible forces. What Freud did through psychoanalysis was bring the myth down to earth by giving it human and scientific interpretations. In that case it was no longer a **Weltanschauung** but became, with Freud, an essential concomitant of the psychological makeup of man, which every person must undergo. Psychoanalysis could be thus considered as de-mythologization, or negation of the myth, which was a prelude to the propagation of a scientific **Weltanschauung.** However, Freud did not fully succeed in achieving this new scientific **Weltanschauung,** though his last two books **Civilization and its Discontents** and **Future of an Illusion** were written within this framework. He could only lay down the broad outlines of the would-be scientific **Weltanschauung** which he did not fully achieve due to his pessimistic nature and his strong conviction that the end of civilization, which he described as neurotic and self-destructive, was imminent. In **Civilization and its Discontents** he concludes by saying :

> The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the psent time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with

their help would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last men. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers', eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result ?(15)

Freud's undialectical approach to civilization, and his concentration on the psychological element as the sole determinant factor in the evolution of a neurotic civilization, resulted in his tragic vision of the future of humanity which he saw in the triumph of destructiveness and the instinct of death over any other human instinct.

The main reason behind Freud's pessimistic attitude, however, is the fact that he concentrated on analysing and developing a theory of unconsciouness. However, what is yet to be achieved is the development of a science of consciousness that will eventually solve the riddle of the unconsciousness and be itself the new scientific **Weltanschauung.**

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15. Sigmund Freud, James Strachey (edit.) **Civilization and its Discontents** (London : The Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 82.

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THE THEBAN LEGEND

The place called Thebes lay in the central plain of Boeotia, part of the narrow tongue of land joining the Athenian country to the more northerly mainland. Here, under the guidance of the oracle of Delphi, a city was first founded by Cadmus, son of Agenor and brother of that Europa whom Zeus courted in the likeness of a bull... Cadmus begat Olypus, and Polybus begat Labdacus, and Labdacus begat Lauis; and to Lauis and his wife Jocasta a son was born. Before even a name had been given to this infant — by some accounts, before he was born — his life was clouded with the presage of disaster; for Apollo's oracle had nothing but ill to foretell of him : he was destined one day to kill his father, and to become his own mother's husband... As a protective measure against the god's prediction Lauis and Jocasta decide that the child should not live. However, they would not take upon themselves the guilt of infanticide, but they would deliver the child to a servant at their court, a shepherd, with orders to abandon it on the mountain-side, its feet cruelly pierced with an iron pin, so that it might not even crawl to safety. Despite this arrangement, still the word of Apollo prevailed through human compassion. F orthe shepherd had not the heart to leave the child to perish; instead he entrusted it to a follow-labourer, a Corinthian shepherd, beseeching him to take it away beyond the borders of Thebes and rear it as his own.

The corintian, a servant of Polybus, King of Corinth, in due course brought the child to his royal master, who, being childless, gladly welcomed the infant and adopted it as his own, giving it the name of Oedipus (Swollen-foot) in commiseration for its painful treatment. Oedipus grew to manhood, the honoured Prince of Corinth and loved foster-son of those whom he supposed to be his true parents. But by chance he came to hear, again from the mouth of Apollo's ministers, the terrible prediction concerning him. Again, as his parents had done, he sought to thwart the oracle. He fled from Corinth, resolved never again to set eyes on his supposed father and mother as long as they lived. His wanderings brought him to Thebes, were now all was calamity and confusion. King Lauis had been killed by an unknown traveller on a lonely road, the city was in the grip of a deadly monster, the Sphinx, who pitted for ferocity against the wits of man, destroying all who failed to answer her cunning riddle : and none could answer it. But in Oedipus the creature met her match. He answered her riddle and destroyed her power, and so was received joyfully into Tebes as her king and heir to the house and forutnne; a happy man, a wise ad resourceful man, and (save for one sharp encounter on his journey from Corinth to Thebes) a man of peace. He married Jocasta ; and sons and daughters were born to them. There passed some fifteen years of seeming prosperity. But beneath the deceptive surface a hideous depth of shame and infamy lay concealed. The gods could no longer brook in silence the affront of Oedipus' unwitting sins. Pestilence and famine brought Thebes once more

to the verge of utter extinction. In their despair her citizens cried to their king for yet more proofs of his infallible resource, and to their gods, chief among them Apollo, for light and healing in their wretchedness." Here the play of **Oedipus the King** begins.

Sophocles, **The Theban Plays** (ed.) E.F. Watting (London : Penguin, 1963), pp. 23-24.



OEDIPUS THE KING



CHARACTERS

OEDIPUS
king of Thebes

A PRIEST
of Zeus

CREON
brother of Jocasta

A CHORUS
of Theban citizens and their LEADER

TIRESIAS
a blind prophet

JOCASTA
the queen, wife of Oedipus

A MESSENGER
from Corinth

A SHEPHERD

A MESSENGER
from inside the palace

ANTIGONE, ISMENE
daughters of Oedipus and Jocasta

Guards and attendants

Priests of Thebes



TIME AND SCENE: *The royal house of Thebes. Double doors dominate the façade; a stone altar stands at the center of the stage.*

Many years have passed since OEDIPUS *solved the riddle of the Sphinx and ascended the throne of Thebes, and now a plague has struck the city. A procession of priests enters; suppliants, broken and despondent, they carry branches wound in wool and lay them on the altar.*

The doors open. Guards assemble. OEDIPUS *comes forward, majestic but for a telltale limp, and slowly views the condition of his people.*

OEDIPUS:

Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes,
why are you here? Huddling at my altar,
praying before me, your branches wound in wool.
Our city reeks with the smoke of burning incense,
rings with cries for the Healer and wailing for the dead.
I thought it wrong, my children, to hear the truth
from others, messengers. Here I am myself—
you all know me, the world knows my fame:
I am Oedipus.

Helping a Priest to his feet.

Speak up, old man. Your years,
your dignity—you should speak for the others.
Why here and kneeling, what preys upon you so?
Some sudden fear? some strong desire?
You can trust me. I am ready to help,
I'll do anything. I would be blind to misery
not to pity my people kneeling at my feet.

PRIEST:

Oh Oedipus, king of the land, our greatest power!
You see us before you now, men of all ages
clinging to your altars. Here are boys,
still too weak to fly from the nest,
and here the old, bowed down with the years,
the holy ones—a priest of Zeus myself—and here
the picked, unmarried men, the young hope of Thebes.
And all the rest, your great family gathers now,
branches wreathed, massing in the squares,
kneeling before the two temples of queen Athena
or the river-shrine where the embers glow and die
and Apollo sees the future in the ashes.

Our city—

look around you, see with your own eyes—
our ship pitches wildly, cannot lift her head
from the depths, the red waves of death . . .
Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops
and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,
and the women die in labor, children stillborn,
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down
on the city, his lightning slashing through us—
raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating
the house of Cadmus! And black Death luxuriates
in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes.

Now we pray to you. You cannot equal the gods,
your children know that, bending at your altar.
But we do rate you first of men,
both in the common crises of our lives
and face-to-face encounters with the gods.
You freed us from the Sphinx, you came to Thebes
and cut us loose from the bloody tribute we had paid
that harsh, brutal singer. We taught you nothing,
no skill, no extra knowledge, still you triumphed.
A god was with you, so they say, and we believe it—
you lifted up our lives.

So now again,

Oedipus, king, we bend to you, your power—
we implore you, all of us on our knees:
find us strength, rescue! Perhaps you've heard
the voice of a god or something from other men,
Oedipus . . . what do you know?
The man of experience—you see it every day—
his plans will work in a crisis, his first of all.

Act now—we beg you, best of men, raise up our city!
Act, defend yourself, your former glory!
Your country calls you savior now
for your zeal, your action years ago.
Never let us remember of your reign:
you helped us stand, only to fall once more.
Oh raise up our city, set us on our feet.
The omens were good that day you brought us joy—
be the same man today!
Rule our land, you know you have the power,
but rule a land of the living, not a wasteland.
Ship and towered city are nothing, stripped of men
alive within it, living all as one.

OEDIPUS:

My children,
I pity you. I see—how could I fail to see
what longings bring you here? Well I know
you are sick to death, all of you,
but sick as you are, not one is sick as I.
Your pain strikes each of you alone, each
in the confines of himself, no other. But my spirit
grieves for the city, for myself and all of you.
I wasn't asleep, dreaming. You haven't wakened me—
I have wept through the nights, you must know that,
groping, laboring over many paths of thought.
After a painful search I found one cure:
I acted at once. I sent Creon,
my wife's own brother, to Delphi—
Apollo the Prophet's oracle—to learn
what I might do or say to save our city.

Today's the day. When I count the days gone by
it torments me . . . what is he doing?
Strange, he's late, he's gone too long.
But once he returns, then, then I'll be a traitor
if I do not do all the god makes clear.

PRIEST:
Timely words. The men over there
are signaling—Creon's just arriving.

OEDIPUS:

Sighting CREON, *then turning to the altar.*

Lord Apollo,
let him come with a lucky word of rescue,
shining like his eyes!

PRIEST:
Welcome news, I think—he's crowned, look,
and the laurel wreath is bright with berries.

OEDIPUS:
We'll soon see. He's close enough to hear—

Enter CREON *from the side; his face is shaded with a wreath.*

Creon, prince, my kinsman, what do you bring us?
What message from the god?

CREON:
Good news.
I tell you even the hardest things to bear,
if they should turn out well, all would be well.

OEDIPUS:
Of course, but what were the god's *words*? There's no hope
and nothing to fear in what you've said so far.

CREON:
If you want my report in the presence of these people . . .

Pointing to the priests while drawing OEDIPUS *toward the palace.*

I'm ready now, or we might go inside.

OEDIPUS:
Speak out,
speak to us all. I grieve for these, my people,
far more than I fear for my own life.

CREON:

Very well,

I will tell you what I heard from the god.
Apollo commands us—he was quite clear—
"Drive the corruption from the land,
don't harbor it any longer, past all cure,
don't nurse it in your soil—root it out!"

OEDIPUS:

How can we cleanse ourselves—what rites?
What's the source of the trouble?

CREON:

Banish the man, or pay back blood with blood.
Murder sets the plague-storm on the city.

OEDIPUS:

Whose murder?

Whose fate does Apollo bring to light?

CREON:

Our leader,

my lord, was once a man named Laius,
before you came and put us straight on course.

OEDIPUS:

I know—

or so I've heard. I never saw the man myself.

CREON:

Well, he was killed, and Apollo commands us now—
he could not be more clear,
"Pay the killers back—whoever is responsible."

OEDIPUS:
Where on earth are they? Where to find it now,
the trail of the ancient guilt so hard to trace?

CREON:
"Here in Thebes," he said.
Whatever is sought for can be caught, you know,
whatever is neglected slips away.

OEDIPUS:
But where,
in the palace, the fields or foreign soil,
where did Laius meet his bloody death?

CREON:
He went to consult an oracle, Apollo said,
and he set out and never came home again.

OEDIPUS:
No messenger, no fellow-traveler saw what happened?
Someone to cross-examine?

CREON:
No,
they were all killed but one. He escaped,
terrified, he could tell us nothing clearly,
nothing of what he saw—just one thing.

OEDIPUS:
What's that?
One thing could hold the key to it all,
a small beginning give us grounds for hope.

CREON:
He said thieves attacked them—a whole band,
not single-handed, cut King Laius down.

OEDIPUS:
A thief,
so daring, so wild, he'd kill a king? Impossible,
unless conspirators paid him off in Thebes.

CREON:
We suspected as much. But with Laius dead
no leader appeared to help us in our troubles.

OEDIPUS:
Trouble? Your *king* was murdered—royal blood!
What stopped you from tracking down the killer
then and there?

CREON:
The singing, riddling Sphinx.
She . . . persuaded us to let the mystery go
and concentrate on what lay at our feet.

OEDIPUS:

No,

I'll start again—I'll bring it all to light myself!
Apollo is right, and so are you, Creon,
to turn our attention back to the murdered man.
Now you have *me* to fight for you, you'll see:
I am the land's avenger by all rights,
and Apollo's champion too.
But not to assist some distant kinsman, no,
for my own sake I'll rid us of this corruption.
Whoever killed the king may decide to kill me too,
with the same violent hand—by avenging Laius
I defend myself.

To the priests.

Quickly, my children.
Up from the steps, take up your branches now.

To the guards.

One of you summon the city here before us,
tell them I'll do everything. God help us,
we will see our triumph—or our fall.

OEDIPUS *and* CREON *enter the palace, followed by the guards.*

PRIEST:

Rise, my sons. The kindness we came for
Oedipus volunteers himself.
Apollo has sent his word, his oracle—
Come down, Apollo, save us, stop the plague.

The priests rise, remove their branches and exit to the side.

Enter a CHORUS, *the citizens of Thebes, who have not heard the news that* CREON *brings. They march around the altar, chanting.*

CHORUS:

Zeus!

Great welcome voice of Zeus, what do you bring?
What word from the gold vaults of Delphi
comes to brilliant Thebes? Racked with terror—
terror shakes my heart
and I cry your wild cries, Apollo, Healer of Delos
I worship you in dread . . . what now, what is your price?
some new sacrifice? some ancient rite from the past
come round again each spring?—
what will you bring to birth?
Tell me, child of golden Hope
warm voice that never dies!

You are the first I call, daughter of Zeus
deathless Athena—I call your sister Artemis,
heart of the market place enthroned in glory,
guardian of our earth—
I call Apollo, Archer astride the thunderheads of heaven—
O triple shield against death, shine before me now!
If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin
launched against our walls
you hurled the flame of pain
far, far from Thebes—you gods
come now, come down once more!

No, no
the miseries numberless, grief on grief, no end—
too much to bear, we are all dying
O my people . . .
  Thebes like a great army dying
and there is no sword of thought to save us, no
and the fruits of our famous earth, they will not ripen
no and the women cannot scream their pangs to birth—
screams for the Healer, children dead in the womb
            and life on life goes down
                        you can watch them go
  like seabirds winging west, outracing the day's fire
down the horizon, irresistibly
            streaking on to the shores of Evening
                              Death
so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end—
Thebes is dying, look, her children
stripped of pity . . .
  generations strewn on the ground
unburied, unwept, the dead spreading death
and the young wives and gray-haired mothers with them
cling to the altars, trailing in from all over the city—
Thebes, city of death, one long cortege
            and the suffering rises
                        wails for mercy rise
  and the wild hymn for the Healer blazes out
clashing with our sobs our cries of mourning—
  O golden daughter of god, send rescue
  radiant as the kindness in your eyes!

Drive him back!—the fever, the god of death
                                        that raging god of war
not armored in bronze, not shielded now, he burns me,
battle cries in the onslaught burning on—
O rout him from our borders!
Sail him, blast him out to the Sea-queen's chamber
                                        the black Atlantic gulfs
    or the northern harbor, death to all
where the Thracian surf comes crashing.
Now what the night spares he comes by day and kills—
the god of death.

                                        O lord of the stormcloud,
you who twirl the lightning, Zeus, Father,
thunder Death to nothing!

Apollo, lord of the light, I beg you—
    whip your longbow's golden cord
showering arrows on our enemies—shafts of power
champions strong before us rushing on!

Artemis, Huntress,
torches flaring over the eastern ridges—
                                        ride Death down in pain!

God of the headdress gleaming gold, I cry to you—
your name and ours are one, Dionysus—
    come with your face aflame with wine
                                        your raving women's cries
    your army on the march! Come with the lightning
come with torches blazing, eyes ablaze with glory!
Burn that god of death that all gods hate!

OEDIPUS enters from the palace to address the CHORUS, as if addressing the entire city of Thebes.

OEDIPUS:
You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers.
Come, listen to me—do what the plague demands:
you'll find relief and lift your head from the depths.

I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,
a stranger to the crime. If I'd been present then,
there would have been no mystery, no long hunt
without a clue in hand. So now, counted
a native Theban years after the murder,
to all of Thebes I make this proclamation:
if any one of you knows who murdered Laius,
the son of Labdacus, I order him to reveal
the whole truth to me. Nothing to fear,
even if he must denounce himself,
let him speak up
and so escape the brunt of the charge—
he will suffer no unbearable punishment,
nothing worse than exile, totally unharmed.

OEDIPUS pauses, waiting for a reply.

Next,
if anyone knows the murderer is a stranger,
a man from alien soil, come, speak up.
I will give him a handsome reward, and lay up
gratitude in my heart for him besides.

Silence again, no reply.

But if you keep silent, if anyone panicking,
trying to shield himself or friend or kin,
rejects my offer, then hear what I will do.
I order you, every citizen of the state
where I hold throne and power: banish this man—
whoever he may be—never shelter him, never
speak a word to him, never make him partner
to your prayers, your victims burned to the gods.
Never let the holy water touch his hands.
Drive him out, each of you, from every home.
He is the plague, the heart of our corruption,
as Apollo's oracle has just revealed to me.
So I honor my obligations:
I fight for the god and for the murdered man.

Now my curse on the murderer. Whoever he is,
a lone man unknown in his crime
or one among many, let that man drag out
his life in agony, step by painful step—
I curse myself as well . . . if by any chance
he proves to be an intimate of our house,
here at my hearth, with my full knowledge,
may the curse I just called down on him strike me!

These are your orders: perform them to the last.
I command you, for my sake, for Apollo's, for this country
blasted root and branch by the angry heavens.
Even if god had never urged you on to act,
how could you leave the crime uncleansed so long?
A man so noble—your king, brought down in blood—
you should have searched. But I am the king now,
I hold the throne that he held then, possess his bed
and a wife who shares our seed . . . why, our seed
might be the same, children born of the same mother
might have created blood-bonds between us
if his hope of offspring had not met disaster—
but fate swooped at his head and cut him short.
So I will fight for him as if he were my father,
stop at nothing, search the world
to lay my hands on the man who shed his blood,
the son of Labdacus descended of Polydorus,
Cadmus of old and Agenor, founder of the line:
their power and mine are one.
Oh dear gods,
my curse on those who disobey these orders!
Let no crops grow out of the earth for them—
shrivel their women, kill their sons,
burn them to nothing in this plague
that hits us now, or something even worse.
But you, loyal men of Thebes who approve my actions,
may our champion, Justice, may all the gods
be with us, fight beside us to the end!

LEADER:

In the grip of your curse, my king, I swear
I'm not the murderer, I cannot point him out.
As for the search, Apollo pressed it on us—
he should name the killer.

OEDIPUS:

Quite right,
but to force the gods to act against their will—
no man has the power.

LEADER:

Then if I might mention
the next best thing . . .

OEDIPUS:

The third best too—
don't hold back, say it.

LEADER:

I still believe . . .
Lord Tiresias sees with the eyes of Lord Apollo.
Anyone searching for the truth, my king,
might learn it from the prophet, clear as day.

OEDIPUS:

I've not been slow with that. On Creon's cue
I sent the escorts, twice, within the hour.
I'm surprised he isn't here.

LEADER:

We need him—
without him we have nothing but old, useless rumors.

OEDIPUS:
Which rumors? I'll search out every word.

LEADER:
Laius was killed, they say, by certain travelers.

OEDIPUS:
I know—but no one can find the murderer.

LEADER:
If the man has a trace of fear in him
he won't stay silent long,
not with your curses ringing in his ears.

OEDIPUS:
He didn't flinch at murder,
he'll never flinch at words.

Enter TIRESIAS, the blind prophet, led by a boy with escorts in attendance. He remains at a distance.

LEADER:
Here is the one who will convict him, look,
they bring him on at last, the seer, the man of god.
The truth lives inside him, him alone.

OEDIPUS:

O Tiresias,
master of all the mysteries of our life,
all you teach and all you dare not tell,
signs in the heavens, signs that walk the earth!
Blind as you are, you can feel all the more
what sickness haunts our city. You, my lord,
are the one shield, the one savior we can find.

We asked Apollo—perhaps the messengers
haven't told you—he sent his answer back:
"Relief from the plague can only come one way.
Uncover the murderers of Laius,
put them to death or drive them into exile."
So I beg you, grudge us nothing now, no voice,
no message plucked from the birds, the embers
or the other mantic ways within your grasp.
Rescue yourself, your city, rescue me—
rescue everything infected by the dead.
We are in your hands. For a man to help others
with all his gifts and native strength:
that is the noblest work.

TIRESIAS:

How terrible—to see the truth
when the truth is only pain to him who sees!
I knew it well, but I put it from my mind,
else I never would have come.

OEDIPUS:
What's this? Why so grim, so dire?

TIRESIAS:
Just send me home. You bear your burdens,
I'll bear mine. It's better that way,
please believe me.

OEDIPUS:
Strange response . . . unlawful,
unfriendly too to the state that bred and reared you—
you withhold the word of god.

TIRESIAS:
I fail to see
that your own words are so well-timed.
I'd rather not have the same thing said of me . . .

OEDIPUS:
For the love of god, don't turn away,
not if you know something. We beg you,
all of us on our knees.

TIRESIAS:
None of you knows—
and I will never reveal my dreadful secrets,
not to say your own.

OEDIPUS:
What? You know and you won't tell?
You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes?

TIRESIAS:
I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.
So why this . . . useless interrogation?
You'll get nothing from me.

OEDIPUS:

Nothing! You,
you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone!
You won't talk? Nothing moves you?
Out with it, once and for all!

TIRESIAS:
You criticize my temper . . . unaware
of the one *you* live with, you revile me.

OEDIPUS:
Who could restrain his anger hearing you?
What outrage—you spurn the city!

TIRESIAS:
What will come will come.
Even if I shroud it all in silence.

OEDIPUS:
What will come? You're bound to *tell* me that.

TIRESIAS:
I will say no more. Do as you like, build your anger
to whatever pitch you please, rage your worst—

OEDIPUS:
Oh I'll let loose, I have such fury in me—
now I see it all. You helped hatch the plot,
you did the work, yes, short of killing him
with your own hands—and given eyes I'd say
you did the killing single-handed!

TIRESIAS:

Is that so!
I charge you, then, submit to that decree
you just laid down: from this day onward
speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself.
You are the curse, the corruption of the land!

OEDIPUS:
You, shameless—
aren't you appalled to start up such a story?
You think you can get away with this?

TIRESIAS:

I have already.
The truth with all its power lives inside me.

OEDIPUS:
Who primed you for this? Not your prophet's trade.

TIRESIAS:
You did, you forced me, twisted it out of me.

OEDIPUS:
What? Say it again—I'll understand it better.

TIRESIAS:
Didn't you understand, just now?
Or are you tempting me to talk?

OEDIPUS:
No, I can't say I grasped your meaning.
Out with it, again!

TIRESIAS:
I say you are the murderer you hunt.

OEDIPUS:
That obscenity, twice—by god, you'll pay.

TIRESIAS:
Shall I say more, so you can really rage?

OEDIPUS:
Much as you want. Your words are nothing—
futile.

TIRESIAS:
You cannot imagine . . . I tell you,
you and your loved ones live together in infamy,
you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt.

OEDIPUS:
You think you can keep this up and never suffer?

TIRESIAS:
Indeed, if the truth has any power.

OEDIPUS:

It does
but not for you, old man. You've lost your power,
stone-blind, stone-deaf—senses, eyes blind as stone!

TIRESIAS:
I pity you, flinging at me the very insults
each man here will fling at you so soon.

OEDIPUS:

Blind,
lost in the night, endless night that nursed you!
You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light—
you can never touch me.

TIRESIAS:

True, it is not your fate
to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough,
and he will take some pains to work this out.

OEDIPUS:
Creon! Is this conspiracy his or yours?

TIRESIAS:
Creon is not your downfall, no, you are your own.

OEDIPUS:

O power—

wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill
in the heady rivalries of life,
what envy lurks inside you! Just for this,
the crown the city gave me—I never sought it,
they laid it in my hands—for this alone, Creon,
the soul of trust, my loyal friend from the start
steals against me . . . so hungry to overthrow me
he sets this wizard on me, this scheming quack,
this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled
for his own profit—seer blind in his craft!

Come here, you pious fraud. Tell me,
when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?
When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her deathwatch here,
why silent then, not a word to set our people free?
There was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve—
it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
you and your birds, your gods—nothing.
No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

And this is the man you'd try to overthrow?
You think you'll stand by Creon when he's king?
You and the great mastermind—
you'll pay in tears, I promise you, for this,
this witch-hunt. If you didn't look so senile
the lash would teach you what your scheming means!

LEADER:
I would suggest his words were spoken in anger,
Oedipus . . . yours too, and it isn't what we need.
The best solution to the oracle, the riddle
posed by god—we should look for that.

TIRESIAS:
You are the king no doubt, but in one respect,
at least, I am your equal: the right to reply.
I claim that privilege too.
I am not your slave. I serve Apollo.
I don't need Creon to speak for me in public.

So,

you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this.
You with your precious eyes,
you're blind to the corruption of your life,
to the house you live in, those you live with—
who *are* your parents? Do you know? All unknowing
you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,
the dead below the earth and the living here above,
and the double lash of your mother and your father's curse
will whip you from this land one day, their footfall
treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding
your eyes that now can see the light!

Soon, soon

you'll scream aloud—what haven won't reverberate?
What rock of Cithaeron won't scream back in echo?
That day you learn the truth about your marriage,
the wedding-march that sang you into your halls,
the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor!
And a crowd of other horrors you'd never dream
will level you with yourself and all your children.

There. Now smear us with insults—Creon, myself
and every word I've said. No man will ever
be rooted from the earth as brutally as you.

OEDIPUS:
Enough! Such filth from him? Insufferable—
what, still alive? Get out—
faster, back where you came from—vanish!

TIRESIAS:
I would never have come if you hadn't called me here.

OEDIPUS:
If I thought you would blurt out such absurdities,
you'd have died waiting before I'd had you summoned.

TIRESIAS:
Absurd, am I! To you, not to your parents:
the ones who bore you found me sane enough.

OEDIPUS:
Parents—who? Wait . . . who is my father?

TIRESIAS:
This day will bring your birth and your destruction.

OEDIPUS:
Riddles—all you can say are riddles, murk and darkness.

TIRESIAS:
Ah, but aren't you the best man alive at solving riddles?

OEDIPUS:
Mock me for that, go on, and you'll reveal my greatness.

TIRESIAS:
Your great good fortune, true, it was your ruin.

OEDIPUS:
Not if I saved the city—what do I care?

TIRESIAS:
Well then, I'll be going.

To his attendant.

Take me home, boy.

OEDIPUS:

Yes, take him away. You're a nuisance here.
Out of the way, the irritation's gone.

Turning his back on TIRESIAS,
moving toward the palace.

TIRESIAS:

I will go,
once I have said what I came here to say.
I will never shrink from the anger in your eyes—
you can't destroy me. Listen to me closely:
the man you've sought so long, proclaiming,
cursing up and down, the murderer of Laius—
he is here. A stranger,
you may think, who lives among you,
he soon will be revealed a native Theban
but he will take no joy in the revelation.
Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich,
he will grope his way toward a foreign soil,
a stick tapping before him step by step.

OEDIPUS *enters the palace.*

Revealed at last, brother and father both
to the children he embraces, to his mother
son and husband both—he sowed the loins
his father sowed, he spilled his father's blood!

Go in and reflect on that, solve that.
And if you find I've lied
from this day onward call the prophet blind.

TIRESIAS *and the boy exit to the side.*

CHORUS:

Who—

who is the man the voice of god denounces
resounding out of the rocky gorge of Delphi?
The horror too dark to tell,
whose ruthless bloody hands have done the work?
His time has come to fly
to outrace the stallions of the storm
his feet a streak of speed—
Cased in armor, Apollo son of the Father
lunges on him, lightning-bolts afire!
And the grim unerring Furies
closing for the kill.

Look,

the word of god has just come blazing
flashing off Parnassus' snowy heights!
That man who left no trace—
after him, hunt him down with all our strength!
Now under bristling timber
up through rocks and caves he stalks
like the wild mountain bull—
cut off from men, each step an agony, frenzied, racing blind
but he cannot outrace the dread voices of Delphi
ringing out of the heart of Earth,
the dark wings beating around him shrieking doom
the doom that never dies, the terror—

The skilled prophet scans the birds and shatters me with terror!
I can't accept him, can't deny him, don't know what to say,
I'm lost, and the wings of dark foreboding beating—
I cannot see what's come, what's still to come . . .
and what could breed a blood feud between
  Laius' house and the son of Polybus?
I know of nothing, not in the past and not now,
no charge to bring against our king, no cause
to attack his fame that rings throughout Thebes—
  not without proof—not for the ghost of Laius,
  not to avenge a murder gone without a trace.

Zeus and Apollo know, they know, the great masters
    of all the dark and depth of human life.
But whether a mere man can know the truth,
whether a seer can fathom more than I—
there is no test, no certain proof
    though matching skill for skill
a man can outstrip a rival. No, not till I see
these charges proved will I side with his accusers.
We saw him then, when the she-hawk swept against him,
saw with our own eyes his skill, his brilliant triumph—
  there was the test—he was the joy of Thebes!
  Never will I convict my king, never in my heart.

Enter CREON *from the side.*

CREON:

My fellow-citizens, I hear King Oedipus
levels terrible charges at me. I had to come.
I resent it deeply. If, in the present crisis,
he thinks he suffers any abuse from me,
anything I've done or said that offers him
the slightest injury, why, I've no desire
to linger out this life, my reputation in ruins.
The damage I'd face from such an accusation
is nothing simple. No, there's nothing worse:
branded a traitor in the city, a traitor
to all of you and my good friends.

LEADER:

True,
but a slur might have been forced out of him,
by anger perhaps, not any firm conviction.

CREON:

The charge was made in public, wasn't it?
I put the prophet up to spreading lies?

LEADER:

Such things were said . . .
I don't know with what intent, if any.

CREON:

Was his glance steady, his mind right
when the charge was brought against me?

LEADER:
I really couldn't say. I never look
to judge the ones in power.

The doors open. OEDIPUS *enters.*

Wait,
here's Oedipus now.

OEDIPUS:
You—here? You have the gall
to show your face before the palace gates?
You, plotting to kill me, kill the king—
I see it all, the marauding thief himself
scheming to steal my crown and power!
Tell me,
in god's name, what did you take me for,
coward or fool, when you spun out your plot?
Your treachery—you think I'd never detect it
creeping against me in the dark? Or sensing it,
not defend myself? Aren't you the fool,
you and your high adventure. Lacking numbers,
powerful friends, out for the big game of empire—
you need riches, armies to bring that quarry down!

CREON:
Are you quite finished? It's your turn to listen
for just as long as you've . . . instructed me.
Hear me out, then judge me on the facts.

OEDIPUS:
You've a wicked way with words, Creon,
but I'll be slow to learn—from you.
I find you a menace, a great burden to me.

CREON:
Just one thing, hear me out in this.

OEDIPUS:

Just one thing,
don't tell *me* you're not the enemy, the traitor.

CREON:
Look, if you think crude, mindless stubbornness
such a gift, you've lost your sense of balance.

OEDIPUS:
If you think you can abuse a kinsman,
then escape the penalty, you're insane.

CREON:
Fair enough, I grant you. But this injury
you say I've done you, what is it?

OEDIPUS:
Did you induce me, yes or no,
to send for that sanctimonious prophet?

CREON:
I did. And I'd do the same again.

OEDIPUS:
All right then, tell me, how long is it now
since Laius . . .

CREON:

Laius—what did *he* do?

OEDIPUS:

Vanished,
swept from sight, murdered in his tracks.

CREON:
The count of the years would run you far back . .

OEDIPUS:
And that far back, was the prophet at his trade?

CREON:
Skilled as he is today, and just as honored.

OEDIPUS:
Did he ever refer to me then, at that time?

CREON:
No,
never, at least, when I was in his presence.

OEDIPUS:
But you did investigate the murder, didn't you?

CREON:
We did our best, of course, discovered nothing.

OEDIPUS:
But the great seer never accused me then—why not?

CREON:
I don't know. And when I don't, *I* keep quiet.

OEDIPUS:
You do know this, you'd tell it too—
if you had a shred of decency.

CREON:
What?
If I know, I won't hold back.

OEDIPUS:

Simply this:
if the two of you had never put heads together,
we would never have heard about *my* killing Laius.

CREON:
If that's what he says . . . well, you know best.
But now I have a right to learn from you
as you just learned from me.

OEDIPUS:

Learn your fill,
you never will convict me of the murder.

CREON:
Tell me, you're married to my sister, aren't you?

OEDIPUS:
A genuine discovery—there's no denying that.

CREON:
And you rule the land with her, with equal power?

OEDIPUS:
She receives from me whatever she desires.

CREON:
And I am the third, all of us are equals?

OEDIPUS:
Yes, and it's there you show your stripes—
you betray a kinsman.

CREON:

Not at all.

Not if you see things calmly, rationally,
as I do. Look at it this way first:
who in his right mind would rather rule
and live in anxiety than sleep in peace?
Particularly if he enjoys the same authority.
Not I, I'm not the man to yearn for kingship,
not with a king's power in my hands. Who would?
No one with any sense of self-control.
Now, as it is, you offer me all I need,
not a fear in the world. But if I wore the crown . . .
there'd be many painful duties to perform,
hardly to my taste.

How could kingship

please me more than influence, power
without a qualm? I'm not that deluded yet,
to reach for anything but privilege outright,
profit free and clear.
Now all men sing my praises, all salute me,
now all who request your favors curry mine.
I am their best hope: success rests in me.
Why give up that, I ask you, and borrow trouble?
A man of sense, someone who sees things clearly
would never resort to treason.
No, I have no lust for conspiracy in me,
nor could I ever suffer one who does.

Do you want proof? Go to Delphi yourself,
examine the oracle and see if I've reported
the message word-for-word. This too:
if you detect that I and the clairvoyant
have plotted anything in common, arrest me,
execute me. Not on the strength of one vote,
two in this case, mine as well as yours.
But don't convict me on sheer unverified surmise.

How wrong it is to take the good for bad,
purely at random, or take the bad for good.
But reject a friend, a kinsman? I would as soon
tear out the life within us, priceless life itself.
You'll learn this well, without fail in time.
Time alone can bring the just man to light—
the criminal you can spot in one short day.

LEADER:

Good advice,
my lord, for anyone who wants to avoid disaster.
Those who jump to conclusions may go wrong.

OEDIPUS:
When my enemy moves against me quickly,
plots in secret, I move quickly too, I must,
I plot and pay him back. Relax my guard a moment,
waiting his next move—he wins his objective,
I lose mine.

CREON:
What do you want?
You want me banished?

OEDIPUS:
No, I want you dead.

CREON:
Just to show how ugly a grudge can . . .

OEDIPUS:
So,
still stubborn? you don't think I'm serious?

CREON:
I think you're insane.

OEDIPUS:

Quite sane—in my behalf.

CREON:
Not just as much in mine?

OEDIPUS:

You—my mortal enemy?

CREON:
What if you're wholly wrong?

OEDIPUS:

No matter—I must rule.

CREON:
Not if you rule unjustly.

OEDIPUS:

Hear him, Thebes, my city!

CREON:
My city too, not yours alone!

LEADER:
Please, my lords.

Enter JOCASTA *from the palace.*

Look, Jocasta's coming,
and just in time too. With her help
you must put this fighting of yours to rest.

JOCASTA:
Have you no sense? Poor misguided men,
such shouting—why this public outburst?
Aren't you ashamed, with the land so sick,
to stir up private quarrels?

To OEDIPUS.

Into the palace now. And Creon, you go home.
Why make such a furor over nothing?

CREON:
My sister, it's dreadful . . . Oedipus, your husband,
he's bent on a choice of punishments for me,
banishment from the fatherland or death.

OEDIPUS:
Precisely. I caught him in the act, Jocasta,
plotting, about to stab me in the back.

CREON:
Never—curse me, let me die and be damned
if I've done you any wrong you charge me with.

JOCASTA:
Oh god, believe it, Oedipus,
honor the solemn oath he swears to heaven.
Do it for me, for the sake of all your people.

The CHORUS *begins to chant.*

CHORUS:
Believe it, be sensible
give way, my king, I beg you!

OEDIPUS:
What do you want from me, concessions?

CHORUS:
Respect him—he's been no fool in the past
and now he's strong with the oath he swears to god.

OEDIPUS:
You know what you're asking?

CHORUS:
I do.

OEDIPUS:
Then out with it!

CHORUS:
The man's your friend, your kin, he's under oath—
don't cast him out, disgraced
branded with guilt on the strength of hearsay only.

OEDIPUS:
Know full well, if that is what you want
you want me dead or banished from the land.

CHORUS:

Never—
no, by the blazing Sun, first god of the heavens!
Stripped of the gods, stripped of loved ones,
let me die by inches if that ever crossed my mind.
But the heart inside me sickens, dies as the land dies
and now on top of the old griefs you pile this,
your fury—both of you!

OEDIPUS:

Then let him go,
even if it does lead to my ruin, my death
or my disgrace, driven from Thebes for life.
It's you, not him I pity—your words move me.
He, wherever he goes, my hate goes with him.

CREON:

Look at you, sullen in yielding, brutal in your rage—
you will go too far. It's perfect justice:
natures like yours are hardest on themselves.

OEDIPUS:

Then leave me alone—get out!

CREON:

I'm going.
You're wrong, so wrong. These men know I'm right.

Exit to the side. The CHORUS *turns to* JOCASTA.

CHORUS:

Why do you hesitate, my lady
  why not help him in?

JOCASTA:

Tell me what's happened first.

CHORUS:

Loose, ignorant talk started dark suspicions
and a sense of injustice cut deeply too.

JOCASTA:

On both sides?

CHORUS:

Oh yes.

JOCASTA:

What did they say?

CHORUS:

Enough, please, enough! The land's so racked already
or so it seems to me . . .
End the trouble here, just where they left it.

OEDIPUS:

You see what comes of your good intentions now?
And all because you tried to blunt my anger.

CHORUS:

My king,

I've said it once, I'll say it time and again—
  I'd be insane, you know it,
senseless, ever to turn my back on you.
You who set our beloved land—storm-tossed, shattered—
straight on course. Now again, good helmsman,
steer us through the storm!

The CHORUS *draws away, leaving* OEDIPUS *and* JOCASTA *side by side.*

JOCASTA:

For the love of god,
Oedipus, tell me too, what is it?
Why this rage? You're so unbending.

OEDIPUS:
I will tell you. I respect you, Jocasta,
much more than these men here . . .

Glancing at the CHORUS.

Creon's to blame, Creon schemes against me.

JOCASTA:
Tell me clearly, how did the quarrel start?

OEDIPUS:
He says *I* murdered Laius—I am guilty.

JOCASTA:
How does he know? Some secret knowledge
or simple hearsay?

OEDIPUS:

Oh, he sent his prophet in
to do his dirty work. You know Creon,
Creon keeps his own lips clean.

JOCASTA:

A prophet?

Well then, free yourself of every charge!
Listen to me and learn some peace of mind:
no skill in the world,
nothing human can penetrate the future.
Here is proof, quick and to the point.

An oracle came to Laius one fine day
(I won't say from Apollo himself
but his underlings, his priests) and it declared
that doom would strike him down at the hands of a son,
our son, to be born of our own flesh and blood. But Laius,
so the report goes at least, was killed by strangers,
thieves, at a place where three roads meet . . . my son—
he wasn't three days old and the boy's father
fastened his ankles, had a henchman fling him away
on a barren, trackless mountain.

There, you see?

Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby
no more murdered his father than Laius suffered—
his wildest fear—death at his own son's hands.
That's how the seers and all their revelations
mapped out the future. Brush them from your mind.
Whatever the god needs and seeks
he'll bring to light himself, with ease.

OEDIPUS:

Strange,

hearing you just now . . . my mind wandered,
my thoughts racing back and forth.

JOCASTA:
What do you mean? Why so anxious, startled?

OEDIPUS:
I thought I heard you say that Laius
was cut down at a place where three roads meet.

JOCASTA:
That was the story. It hasn't died out yet.

OEDIPUS:
Where did this thing happen? Be precise.

JOCASTA:
A place called Phocis, where two branching roads,
one from Daulia, one from Delphi,
come together—a crossroads.

OEDIPUS:
When? How long ago?

JOCASTA:
The heralds no sooner reported Laius dead
than you appeared and they hailed you king of Thebes.

OEDIPUS:
My god, my god—what have you planned to do to me?

JOCASTA:
What, Oedipus? What haunts you so?

OEDIPUS:

Not yet.
Laius—how did he look? Describe him.
Had he reached his prime?

JOCASTA:

He was swarthy,

and the gray had just begun to streak his temples,
and his build . . . wasn't far from yours.

OEDIPUS:

Oh no no,

I think I've just called down a dreadful curse
upon myself—I simply didn't know!

JOCASTA:

What are you saying? I shudder to look at you.

OEDIPUS:

I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see.
I'll know in a moment. One thing more—

JOCASTA:

Anything,

afraid as I am—ask, I'll answer, all I can.

OEDIPUS:

Did he go with a light or heavy escort,
several men-at-arms, like a lord, a king?

JOCASTA:

There were five in the party, a herald among them,
and a single wagon carrying Laius.

OEDIPUS:

Ai—

now I can see it all, clear as day.
Who told you all this at the time, Jocasta?

JOCASTA:
A servant who reached home, the lone survivor.

OEDIPUS:
So, could he still be in the palace—even now?

JOCASTA:
No indeed. Soon as he returned from the scene
and saw you on the throne with Laius dead and gone,
he knelt and clutched my hand, pleading with me
to send him into the hinterlands, to pasture,
far as possible, out of sight of Thebes.
I sent him away. Slave though he was,
he'd earned that favor—and much more.

OEDIPUS:
Can we bring him back, quickly?

JOCASTA:
Easily. Why do you want him so?

OEDIPUS:
I am afraid,
Jocasta, I have said too much already.
That man—I've got to see him.

JOCASTA:
Then he'll come.
But even I have a right, I'd like to think,
to know what's torturing you, my lord.

OEDIPUS:
And so you shall—I can hold nothing back from you,
now I've reached this pitch of dark foreboding.
Who means more to me than you? Tell me,
whom would I turn toward but you
as I go through all this?

My father was Polybus, king of Corinth.
My mother, a Dorian, Merope. And I was held
the prince of the realm among the people there,
till something struck me out of nowhere,
something strange . . . worth remarking perhaps,
hardly worth the anxiety I gave it.
Some man at a banquet who had drunk too much
shouted out—he was far gone, mind you—
that I am not my father's son. Fighting words!
I barely restrained myself that day
but early the next I went to mother and father,
questioned them closely, and they were enraged
at the accusation and the fool who let it fly.
So as for my parents I was satisfied,
but still this thing kept gnawing at me,
the slander spread—I had to make my move.

And so,

unknown to mother and father I set out for Delphi,
and the god Apollo spurned me, sent me away
denied the facts I came for,
but first he flashed before my eyes a future
great with pain, terror, disaster—I can hear him cry,
"You are fated to couple with your mother, you will bring
a breed of children into the light no man can bear to see—
you will kill your father, the one who gave you life!"
I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth,
from that day on I gauged its landfall only
by the stars, running, always running
toward some place where I would never see
the shame of all those oracles come true.
And as I fled I reached that very spot
where the great king, you say, met his death.

Now, Jocasta, I will tell you all.
Making my way toward this triple crossroad
I began to see a herald, then a brace of colts
drawing a wagon, and mounted on the bench . . . a man,
just as you've described him, coming face-to-face,
and the one in the lead and the old man himself
were about to thrust me off the road—brute force—
and the one shouldering me aside, the driver,
I strike him in anger!—and the old man, watching me
coming up along his wheels—he brings down
his prod, two prongs straight at my head!
I paid him back with interest!
Short work, by god—with one blow of the staff
in this right hand I knock him out of his high seat,
roll him out of the wagon, sprawling headlong—
I killed them all—every mother's son!

Oh, but if there is any blood-tie
between Laius and this stranger . . .
what man alive more miserable than I?
More hated by the gods? *I* am the man
no alien, no citizen welcomes to his house,
law forbids it—not a word to me in public,
driven out of every hearth and home.
And all these curses I—no one but I
brought down these piling curses on myself!
And you, his wife, I've touched your body with these,
the hands that killed your husband cover you with blood.

Wasn't I born for torment? Look me in the eyes!
I am abomination—heart and soul!
I must be exiled, and even in exile
never see my parents, never set foot
on native ground again. Else I am doomed
to couple with my mother and cut my father down . . .
Polybus who reared me, gave me life.

But why, why?
Wouldn't a man of judgment say—and wouldn't he be right—
some savage power has brought this down upon my head?

Oh no, not that, you pure and awesome gods,
never let me see that day! Let me slip
from the world of men, vanish without a trace
before I see myself stained with such corruption,
stained to the heart.

LEADER:
My lord, you fill our hearts with fear.
But at least until you question the witness,
do take hope.

OEDIPUS:
Exactly. He is my last hope—
I am waiting for the shepherd. He is crucial.

JOCASTA:
And once he appears, what then? Why so urgent?

OEDIPUS:
I will tell you. If it turns out that his story
matches yours, I've escaped the worst.

JOCASTA:
What did I say? What struck you so?

OEDIPUS:

You said *thieves*—
he told you a whole band of them murdered Laius.
So, if he still holds to the same number,
I cannot be the killer. One can't equal many.
But if he refers to one man, one alone,
clearly the scales come down on me:
I am guilty.

JOCASTA:

Impossible. Trust me,
I told you precisely what he said,
and he can't retract it now;
the whole city heard it, not just I.
And even if he should vary his first report
by one man more or less, still, my lord,
he could never make the murder of Laius
truly fit the prophecy. Apollo was explicit:
my son was doomed to kill my husband . . . my son,
poor defenseless thing, he never had a chance
to kill his father. They destroyed him first.

So much for prophecy. It's neither here nor there.
From this day on, I wouldn't look right or left.

OEDIPUS:
True, true. Still, that shepherd,
someone fetch him—now!

JOCASTA:
I'll send at once. But do let's go inside.
I'd never displease you, least of all in this.

OEDIPUS *and* JOCASTA *enter the palace.*

CHORUS:

Destiny guide me always
Destiny find me filled with reverence
pure in word and deed.
Great laws tower above us, reared on high
born for the brilliant vault of heaven—
Olympian Sky their only father,
nothing mortal, no man gave them birth,
their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:
within them lives a mighty god, the god does not
grow old.

Pride breeds the tyrant
violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting
with all that is overripe and rich with ruin—
clawing up to the heights, headlong pride
crashes down the abyss—sheer doom!
No footing helps, all foothold lost and gone.
But the healthy strife that makes the city strong—
I pray that god will never end that wrestling:
god, my champion, I will never let you go.

But if any man comes striding, high and mighty
in all he says and does,
no fear of justice, no reverence
for the temples of the gods—
let a rough doom tear him down,
repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!
If he cannot reap his profits fairly
cannot restrain himself from outrage—
mad, laying hands on the holy things untouchable!

Can such a man, so desperate, still boast
he can save his life from the flashing bolts of god?
If all such violence goes with honor now
why join the sacred dance?

Never again will I go reverent to Delphi,
the inviolate heart of Earth
or Apollo's ancient oracle at Abae
or Olympia of the fires—
unless these prophecies all come true
for all mankind to point toward in wonder.
King of kings, if you deserve your titles
Zeus, remember, never forget!
You and your deathless, everlasting reign.

They are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius,
now our masters strike them off the rolls.
Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—
the gods, the gods go down.

Enter JOCASTA *from the palace, carrying a suppliant's branch wound in wool.*

JOCASTA:
Lords of the realm, it occurred to me,
just now, to visit the temples of the gods,
so I have my branch in hand and incense too.

Oedipus is beside himself. Racked with anguish,
no longer a man of sense, he won't admit
the latest prophecies are hollow as the old—
he's at the mercy of every passing voice
if the voice tells of terror.
I urge him gently, nothing seems to help,
so I turn to you, Apollo, you are nearest.

Placing her branch on the altar, while an old herdsman enters from the side, not the one just summoned by the King but an unexpected MESSENGER *from Corinth.*

I come with prayers and offerings . . . I beg you,
cleanse us, set us free of defilement!
Look at us, passengers in the grip of fear,
watching the pilot of the vessel go to pieces.

MESSENGER:

Approaching JOCASTA *and the* CHORUS.

Strangers, please, I wonder if you could lead us
to the palace of the king . . . I think it's Oedipus.
Better, the man himself—you know where he is?

LEADER:
This is his palace, stranger. He's inside.
But here is his queen, his wife and mother
of his children.

MESSENGER:

Blessings on you, noble queen,
queen of Oedipus crowned with all your family—
blessings on you always!

JOCASTA:
And the same to you, stranger, you deserve it . . .
such a greeting. But what have you come for?
Have you brought us news?

MESSENGER:

Wonderful news—
for the house, my lady, for your husband too.

JOCASTA:
Really, what? Who sent you?

MESSENGER:

Corinth.
I'll give you the message in a moment.
You'll be glad of it—how could you help it?—
though it costs a little sorrow in the bargain.

JOCASTA:
What can it be, with such a double edge?

MESSENGER:
The people there, they want to make your Oedipus
king of Corinth, so they're saying now.

JOCASTA:
Why? Isn't old Polybus still in power?

MESSENGER:
No more. Death has got him in the tomb.

JOCASTA:
What are you saying? Polybus, dead?—dead?

MESSENGER:

If not,

if I'm not telling the truth, strike me dead too.

JOCASTA:

To a servant.

Quickly, go to your master, tell him this!

You prophecies of the gods, where are you now?
This is the man that Oedipus feared for years,
he fled him, not to kill him—and now he's dead,
quite by chance, a normal, natural death,
not murdered by his son.

OEDIPUS:

Emerging from the palace.

Dearest,

what now? Why call me from the palace?

JOCASTA:

Bringing the MESSENGER *closer.*

Listen to *him,* see for yourself what all
those awful prophecies of god have come to.

OEDIPUS:
And who is he? What can he have for me?

JOCASTA:
He's from Corinth, he's come to tell you
your father is no more—Polybus—he's dead!

OEDIPUS:

Wheeling on the MESSENGER.

What? Let me have it from your lips.

MESSENGER:

Well,

if that's what you want first, then here it is:
make no mistake, Polybus is dead and gone.

OEDIPUS:

How—murder? sickness?—what? what killed him?

MESSENGER:

A light tip of the scales can put old bones to rest.

OEDIPUS:

Sickness then—poor man, it wore him down.

MESSENGER:

That,

and the long count of years he'd measured out.

OEDIPUS:

So!

Jocasta, why, why look to the Prophet's hearth,
the fires of the future? Why scan the birds
that scream above our heads? They winged me on
to the murder of my father, did they? That was my doom?
Well look, he's dead and buried, hidden under the earth,
and here I am in Thebes, I never put hand to sword—
unless some longing for me wasted him away,
then in a sense you'd say I caused his death.
But now, all those prophecies I feared—Polybus
packs them off to sleep with him in hell!
They're nothing, worthless.

JOCASTA:

There.

Didn't I tell you from the start?

OEDIPUS:

So you did. I was lost in fear.

JOCASTA:

No more, sweep it from your mind forever.

OEDIPUS:

But my mother's bed, surely I must fear—

JOCASTA:

Fear?

What should a man fear? It's all chance,
chance rules our lives. Not a man on earth
can see a day ahead, groping through the dark.
Better to live at random, best we can.
And as for this marriage with your mother—
have no fear. Many a man before you,
in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed.
Take such things for shadows, nothing at all—
Live, Oedipus,
as if there's no tomorrow!

OEDIPUS:

Brave words,

and you'd persuade me if mother weren't alive.
But mother lives, so for all your reassurances
I live in fear, I must.

JOCASTA:

But your father's death,

that, at least, is a great blessing, joy to the eyes!

OEDIPUS:
Great, I know . . . but I fear *her*—she's still alive.

MESSENGER:
Wait, who is this woman, makes you so afraid?

OEDIPUS:
Merope, old man. The wife of Polybus.

MESSENGER:
The queen? What's there to fear in her?

OEDIPUS:
A dreadful prophecy, stranger, sent by the gods.

MESSENGER:
Tell me, could you? Unless it's forbidden
other ears to hear.

OEDIPUS:
Not at all.
Apollo told me once—it is my fate—
I must make love with my own mother,
shed my father's blood with my own hands.
So for years I've given Corinth a wide berth,
and it's been my good fortune too. But still,
to see one's parents and look into their eyes
is the greatest joy I know.

MESSENGER:
You're afraid of that?
That kept you out of Corinth?

OEDIPUS:

My *father*, old man—

so I wouldn't kill my father.

MESSENGER:

So that's it.

Well then, seeing I came with such good will, my king,
why don't I rid you of that old worry now?

OEDIPUS:

What a rich reward you'd have for that!

MESSENGER:

What do you think I came for, majesty?
So you'd come home and I'd be better off.

OEDIPUS:

Never, I will never go near my parents.

MESSENGER:

My boy, it's clear, you don't know what you're doing.

OEDIPUS:

What do you mean, old man? For god's sake, explain.

MESSENGER:

If you ran from *them*, always dodging home . . .

OEDIPUS:

Always, terrified Apollo's oracle might come true—

MESSENGER:

And you'd be covered with guilt, from both your parents.

OEDIPUS:
That's right, old man, that fear is always with me.

MESSENGER:
Don't you know? You've really nothing to fear.

OEDIPUS:
But why? If I'm their son—Merope, Polybus?

MESSENGER:
Polybus was nothing to you, that's why, not in blood.

OEDIPUS:
What are you saying—Polybus was not my father?

MESSENGER:
No more than I am. He and I are equals.

OEDIPUS:

My father—
how can my father equal nothing? You're nothing to me!

MESSENGER:
Neither was he, no more your father than I am.

OEDIPUS:
Then why did he call me his son?

MESSENGER:

You were a gift,
years ago—know for a fact he took you
from my hands.

OEDIPUS:

No, from another's hands?
Then how could he love me so? He loved me, deeply . . .

MESSENGER:
True, and his early years without a child
made him love you all the more.

OEDIPUS:

And you, did you . . .
buy me? find me by accident?

MESSENGER:

I stumbled on you,
down the woody flanks of Mount Cithaeron.

OEDIPUS:

So close,
what were you doing here, just passing through?

MESSENGER:
Watching over my flocks, grazing them on the slopes.

OEDIPUS:
A herdsman, were you? A vagabond, scraping for wages?

MESSENGER:
Your savior too, my son, in your worst hour.

OEDIPUS:

Oh—
when you picked me up, was I in pain? What exactly?

MESSENGER:
Your ankles . . . they tell the story. Look at them.

OEDIPUS:
Why remind me of that, that old affliction?

MESSENGER:
Your ankles were pinned together. I set you free.

OEDIPUS:
That dreadful mark—I've had it from the cradle.

MESSENGER:
And you got your name from that misfortune too,
the name's still with you.

OEDIPUS:
Dear god, who did it?—
mother? father? Tell me.

MESSENGER:
I don't know.
The one who gave you to me, he'd know more.

OEDIPUS:
What? You took me from someone else?
You didn't find me yourself?

MESSENGER:
No sir,
another shepherd passed you on to me.

OEDIPUS:
Who? Do you know? Describe him.

MESSENGER:
He called himself a servant of . . .
if I remember rightly—Laius.

JOCASTA turns sharply.

OEDIPUS:
The king of the land who ruled here long ago?

MESSENGER:
That's the one. That herdsman was *his* man.

OEDIPUS:
Is he still alive? Can I see him?

MESSENGER:
They'd know best, the people of these parts.

OEDIPUS and the MESSENGER turn to the CHORUS.

OEDIPUS:
Does anyone know that herdsman,
the one he mentioned? Anyone seen him
in the fields, here in the city? Out with it!
The time has come to reveal this once for all.

LEADER:
I think he's the very shepherd you wanted to see,
a moment ago. But the queen, Jocasta,
she's the one to say.

OEDIPUS:

Jocasta,
you remember the man we just sent for?
Is *that* the one he means?

JOCASTA:

That man . . .
why ask? Old shepherd, talk, empty nonsense,
don't give it another thought, don't even think—

OEDIPUS:
What—give up now, with a clue like this?
Fail to solve the mystery of my birth?
Not for all the world!

JOCASTA:

Stop—in the name of god,
if you love your own life, call off this search!
My suffering is enough.

OEDIPUS:

Courage!
Even if my mother turns out to be a slave,
and I a slave, three generations back,
you would not seem common.

JOCASTA:

Oh no,
listen to me, I beg you, don't do this.

OEDIPUS:
Listen to you? No more. I must know it all,
must see the truth at last.

JOCASTA:

No, please—
for your sake—I want the best for you!

OEDIPUS:
Your best is more than I can bear.

JOCASTA:

You're doomed—
may you never fathom who you are!

OEDIPUS:

To a servant.

Hurry, fetch me the herdsman, now!
Leave her to glory in her royal birth.

JOCASTA:
Aieeeeee—
man of agony—
that is the only name I have for you,
that, no other—ever, ever, ever!

Flinging through the palace doors. A long, tense silence follows.

LEADER:
Where's she gone, Oedipus?
Rushing off, such wild grief . . .
I'm afraid that from this silence
something monstrous may come bursting forth.

OEDIPUS:
Let it burst! Whatever will, whatever must!
I must know my birth, no matter how common
it may be—I must see my origins face-to-face.
She perhaps, she with her woman's pride
may well be mortified by my birth,
but I, I count myself the son of Chance,
the great goddess, giver of all good things—
I'll never see myself disgraced. She is my mother!
And the moons have marked me out, my blood-brothers,
one moon on the wane, the next moon great with power.
That is my blood, my nature—I will never betray it,
never fail to search and learn my birth!

CHORUS:
Yes—if I am a true prophet
if I can grasp the truth,
by the boundless skies of Olympus,
at the full moon of tomorrow, Mount Cithaeron
you will know how Oedipus glories in you—
you, his birthplace, nurse, his mountain-mother!
And we will sing you, dancing out your praise—
you lift our monarch's heart!
Apollo, Apollo, god of the wild cry
may our dancing please you!
Oedipus—
son, dear child, who bore you?
Who of the nymphs who seem to live forever
mated with Pan, the mountain-striding Father?
Who was your mother? who, some bride of Apollo
the god who loves the pastures spreading toward the sun?
Or was it Hermes, king of the lightning ridges?
Or Dionysus, lord of frenzy, lord of the barren peaks—
did he seize you in his hands, dearest of all his lucky finds?—
found by the nymphs, their warm eyes dancing, gift
to the lord who loves them dancing out his joy!

OEDIPUS strains to see a figure coming from the distance. Attended by palace guards, an old SHEPHERD enters slowly, reluctant to approach the king.

OEDIPUS:
I never met the man, my friends . . . still,
if I had to guess, I'd say that's the shepherd,
the very one we've looked for all along.
Brothers in old age, two of a kind,
he and our guest here. At any rate
the ones who bring him in are my own men,
I recognize them.

Turning to the LEADER.

But you know more than I,
you should, you've seen the man before.

LEADER:
I know him, definitely. One of Laius' men,
a trusty shepherd, if there ever was one.

OEDIPUS:
You, I ask you first, stranger,
you from Corinth—is this the one you mean?

MESSENGER:
You're looking at him. He's your man.

OEDIPUS:

To the SHEPHERD.

You, old man, come over here—
look at me. Answer all my questions.
Did you ever serve King Laius?

SHEPHERD:

So I did . . .
a slave, not bought on the block though,
born and reared in the palace.

OEDIPUS:
Your duties, your kind of work?

SHEPHERD:
Herding the flocks, the better part of my life.

OEDIPUS:
Where, mostly? Where did you do your grazing?

SHEPHERD:

Well,
Cithaeron sometimes, or the foothills round about.

OEDIPUS:
This man—you know him? ever see him there?

SHEPHERD:

Confused, glancing from the MESSENGER to the King.
Doing what?—what man do you mean?

OEDIPUS:

Pointing to the MESSENGER.
This one here—ever have dealings with him?

SHEPHERD:
Not .. I could say, but give me a chance,
my memory's bad . . .

MESSENGER:
No wonder he doesn't know me, master.
But let me refresh his memory for him.
I'm sure he recalls old times we had
on the slopes of Mount Cithaeron;
he and I, grazing our flocks, he with two
and I with one—we both struck up together,
three whole seasons, six months at a stretch
from spring to the rising of Arcturus in the fall,
then with winter coming on I'd drive my herds
to my own pens, and back he'd go with his
to Laius' folds.

To the SHEPHERD.

Now that's how it was,
wasn't it—yes or no?

SHEPHERD:
Yes, I suppose . . .
it's all so long ago.

MESSENGER:
Come, tell me,
you gave me a child back then, a boy, remember?
A little fellow to rear, my very own.

SHEPHERD:
What? Why rake up that again?

MESSENGER:
Look, here he is, my fine old friend—
the same man who was just a baby then.

SHEPHERD:
Damn you, shut your mouth—quiet!

OEDIPUS:
Don't lash out at him, old man—
you need lashing more than he does.

SHEPHERD:
Why,
master, majesty—what have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS:
You won't answer his question about the boy.

SHEPHERD:
He's talking nonsense, wasting his breath.

OEDIPUS:
So, you won't talk willingly—
then you'll talk with pain.

The guards seize the SHEPHERD.

SHEPHERD:
No, dear god, don't torture an old man!

OEDIPUS:
Twist his arms back, quickly!

SHEPHERD:
God help us, why?—
what more do you need to know?

OEDIPUS:
Did you give him that child? He's asking.

SHEPHERD:
I did . . . I wish to god I'd died that day.

OEDIPUS:
You've got your wish if you don't tell the truth.

SHEPHERD:
The more I tell, the worse the death I'll die.

OEDIPUS:
Our friend here wants to stretch things out, does he?

Motioning to his men for torture.

SHEPHERD:
No, no, I gave it to him—I just said so.

OEDIPUS:
Where did you get it? Your house? Someone else's?

SHEPHERD:
It wasn't mine, no, I got it from . . . someone.

OEDIPUS:
Which one of them?

Looking at the citizens.

Whose house?

SHEPHERD:

No—
god's sake, master, no more questions!

OEDIPUS:
You're a dead man if I have to ask again.

SHEPHERD:
Then—the child came from the house
of Laius.

OEDIPUS:
A slave? or born of his own blood?

SHEPHERD:

Oh no,
I'm right at the edge, the horrible truth—I've got to say it!

OEDIPUS:
And I'm at the edge of hearing horrors, yes, but I must hear!

SHEPHERD:
All right! His son, they said it was—his son!
But the one inside, your wife,
she'd tell it best.

OEDIPUS:
My wife—
she gave it to you?

SHEPHERD:
Yes, yes, my king.

OEDIPUS:
Why, what for?

SHEPHERD:
To kill it.

OEDIPUS:
Her own child,
how could she?

SHEPHERD:
She was afraid—
frightening prophecies.

OEDIPUS:
What?

SHEPHERD:

They said—
he'd kill his parents.

OEDIPUS:
But you gave him to this old man—why?

SHEPHERD:
I pitied the little baby, master,
hoped he'd take him off to his own country,
far away, but he saved him for this, this fate.
If you are the man he says you are, believe me,
you were born for pain.

OEDIPUS:

O god—
all come true, all burst to light!
O light—now let me look my last on you!
I stand revealed at last—
cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage,
cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!

Rushing through the doors with a great cry. The Corinthian MESSENGER, *the* SHEPHERD *and attendants exit slowly to the side.*

CHORUS:

O the generations of men
the dying generations—adding the total
of all your lives I find they come to nothing . . .
does there exist, is there a man on earth
who seizes more joy than just a dream, a vision?
And the vision no sooner dawns than dies
blazing into oblivion.

You are my great example, you, your life
your destiny, Oedipus, man of misery—
I count no man blest.

You outranged all men!
Bending your bow to the breaking-point
you captured priceless glory, O dear god,
and the Sphinx came crashing down,
the virgin, claws hooked
like a bird of omen singing, shrieking death—
like a fortress reared in the face of death
you rose and saved our land.

From that day on we called you king
we crowned you with honors, Oedipus, towering over all—
mighty king of the seven gates of Thebes.

But now to hear your story—is there a man more agonized?
More wed to pain and frenzy? Not a man on earth,
the joy of your life ground down to nothing
O Oedipus, name for the ages—
one and the same wide harbor served you
son and father both
son and father came to rest in the same bridal chamber.
How, how could the furrows your father plowed
bear you, your agony, harrowing on
in silence O so long?

But now for all your power
Time, all-seeing Time has dragged you to the light,
judged your marriage monstrous from the start—
the son and the father tangling, both one—
O child of Laius, would to god
I'd never seen you, never never!
Now I weep like a man who wails the dead
and the dirge comes pouring forth with all my heart!
I tell you the truth, you gave me life
my breath leapt up in you
and now you bring down night upon my eyes.

Enter a MESSENGER *from the palace.*

MESSENGER:
Men of Thebes, always first in honor,
what horrors you will hear, what you will see,
what a heavy weight of sorrow you will shoulder . . .
if you are true to your birth, if you still have
some feeling for the royal house of Thebes.
I tell you neither the waters of the Danube
nor the Nile can wash this palace clean.
Such things it hides, it soon will bring to light—
terrible things, and none done blindly now,
all done with a will. The pains
we inflict upon ourselves hurt most of all.

LEADER:
God knows we have pains enough already.
What can you add to them?

MESSENGER:
The queen is dead.

LEADER:
Poor lady—how?

MESSENGER:
By her own hand. But you are spared the worst,
you never had to watch . . . I saw it all,
and with all the memory that's in me
you will learn what that poor woman suffered.

Once she'd broken in through the gates,
dashing past us, frantic, whipped to fury,
ripping her hair out with both hands—
straight to her rooms she rushed, flinging herself
across the bridal-bed, doors slamming behind her—
once inside, she wailed for Laius, dead so long,
remembering how she bore his child long ago,
the life that rose up to destroy him, leaving
its mother to mother living creatures
with the very son she'd borne.
Oh how she wept, mourning the marriage-bed
where she let loose that double brood—monsters—
husband by her husband, children by her child.

And then—

but how she died is more than I can say. Suddenly
Oedipus burst in, screaming, he stunned us so
we couldn't watch her agony to the end,
our eyes were fixed on him. Circling
like a maddened beast, stalking, here, there,
crying out to us—

Give him a sword! His wife,

no wife, his mother, where can he find the mother earth
that cropped two crops at once, himself and all his children?
He was raging—one of the dark powers pointing the way,
none of us mortals crowding around him, no,
with a great shattering cry—someone, something leading him on—
he hurled at the twin doors and bending the bolts back
out of their sockets, crashed through the chamber.

And there we saw the woman hanging by the neck,
cradled high in a woven noose, spinning,
swinging back and forth. And when he saw her,
giving a low, wrenching sob that broke our hearts,
slipping the halter from her throat, he eased her down,
in a slow embrace he laid her down, poor thing . . .
then, what came next, what horror we beheld!

He rips off her brooches, the long gold pins
holding her robes—and lifting them high,
looking straight up into the points,
he digs them down the sockets of his eyes, crying, "You,
you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused!
Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen,
blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind
from this hour on! Blind in the darkness—blind!"
His voice like a dirge, rising, over and over
raising the pins, raking them down his eyes.
And at each stroke blood spurts from the roots,
splashing his beard, a swirl of it, nerves and clots—
black hail of blood pulsing, gushing down.

These are the griefs that burst upon them both,
coupling man and woman. The joy they had so lately,
the fortune of their old ancestral house
was deep joy indeed. Now, in this one day,
wailing, madness and doom, death, disgrace,
all the griefs in the world that you can name,
all are theirs forever.

LEADER:

Oh poor man, the misery—
has he any rest from pain now?

A voice within, in torment.

MESSENGER:

He's shouting.
"Loose the bolts, someone, show me to all of Thebes!
My father's murderer, my mother's—"
No, I can't repeat it, it's unholy.
Now he'll tear himself from his native earth,
not linger, curse the house with his own curse.
But he needs strength, and a guide to lead him on.
This is sickness more than he can bear.

The palace doors open.

Look,
he'll show you himself. The great doors are opening—
you are about to see a sight, a horror
even his mortal enemy would pity.

Enter OEDIPUS, *blinded, led by a boy. He stands at the palace steps, as if surveying his people once again.*

CHORUS:

O the terror—

the suffering, for all the world to see,
the worst terror that ever met my eyes.
What madness swept over you? What god,
what dark power leapt beyond all bounds,
beyond belief, to crush your wretched life?—
godforsaken, cursed by the gods!
I pity you but I can't bear to look.
I've much to ask, so much to learn,
so much fascinates my eyes,
but you . . . I shudder at the sight.

OEDIPUS:

Oh, Ohh—

the agony! I am agony—
where am I going? where on earth?
where does all this agony hurl me?
where's my voice?—
winging, swept away on a dark tide—
My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!

CHORUS:
To the depths of terror, too dark to hear, to see.

OEDIPUS:

Dark, horror of darkness
my darkness, drowning, swirling around me
crashing wave on wave—unspeakable, irresistible
headwind, fatal harbor! Oh again,
the misery, all at once, over and over
the stabbing daggers, stab of memory
raking me insane.

CHORUS:

No wonder you suffer
twice over, the pain of your wounds,
the lasting grief of pain.

OEDIPUS:

Dear friend, still here?
Standing by me, still with a care for me,
the blind man? Such compassion,
loyal to the last. Oh it's you,
I know you're here, dark as it is
I'd know you anywhere, your voice—
it's yours, clearly yours.

CHORUS:

Dreadful, what you've done . . .
how could you bear it, gouging out your eyes?
What superhuman power drove you on?

OEDIPUS:

Apollo, friends, Apollo—
he ordained my agonies—these, my pains on pains!
But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
mine alone—no one else—
I did it all myself!
What good were eyes to me?
Nothing I could see could bring me joy.

CHORUS:
No, no, exactly as you say.

OEDIPUS:

What can I ever see?
What love, what call of the heart
can touch my ears with joy? Nothing, friends.
Take me away, far, far from Thebes,
quickly, cast me away, my friends—
this great murderous ruin, this man cursed to heaven,
the man the deathless gods hate most of all!

CHORUS:
Pitiful, you suffer so, you understand so much . . .
I wish you had never known.

OEDIPUS:

Die, die—
whoever he was that day in the wilds
who cut my ankles free of the ruthless pins,
he pulled me clear of death, he saved my life
for this, this kindness—
Curse him, kill him!
If I'd died then, I'd never have dragged myself,
my loved ones through such hell.

CHORUS:

Oh if only . . . would to god.

OEDIPUS:

I'd never have come to this,
my father's murderer—never been branded
mother's husband, all men see me now! Now,
loathed by the gods, son of the mother I defiled
coupling in my father's bed, spawning lives in the loins
that spawned my wretched life. What grief can crown this grief?
It's mine alone, my destiny—I am Oedipus!

CHORUS:

How can I say you've chosen for the best?
Better to die than be alive and blind.

OEDIPUS:
What I did was best—don't lecture me,
no more advice. I, with *my* eyes,
how could I look my father in the eyes
when I go down to death? Or mother, so abused . . .
I have done such things to the two of them,
crimes too huge for hanging.
Worse yet,
the sight of my children, born as they were born,
how could I long to look into their eyes?
No, not with these eyes of mine, never.
Not this city either, her high towers,
the sacred glittering images of her gods—
I am misery! I, her best son, reared
as no other son of Thebes was ever reared,
I've stripped myself, I gave the command myself.
All men must cast away the great blasphemer,
the curse now brought to light by the gods,
the son of Laius—I, my father's son!

Now I've exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt,
could I train a level glance on you, my countrymen?
Impossible! No, if I could just block off my ears,
the springs of hearing, I would stop at nothing—
I'd wall up my loathsome body like a prison,
blind to the sound of life, not just the sight.
Oblivion—what a blessing . . .
for the mind to dwell a world away from pain.

O Cithaeron, why did you give me shelter?
Why didn't you take me, crush my life out on the spot?
I'd never have revealed my birth to all mankind.

O Polybus, Corinth, the old house of my fathers,
so I believed—what a handsome prince you raised—
under the skin, what sickness to the core.
Look at me! Born of outrage, outrage to the core.

O triple roads—it all comes back, the secret,
dark ravine, and the oaks closing in
where the three roads join . . .
You drank my father's blood, my own blood
spilled by my own hands—you still remember me?
What things you saw me do? Then I came here
and did them all once more!

Marriages! O marriage,
you gave me birth, and once you brought me into the world
you brought my sperm rising back, springing to light
fathers, brothers, sons—one murderous breed—
brides, wives, mothers. The blackest things
a man can do, I have done them all!

No more—
it's wrong to name what's wrong to do. Quickly,
for the love of god, hide me somewhere,
kill me, hurl me into the sea
where you can never look on me again.

Beckoning to the CHORUS *as they shrink away.*

Closer,
it's all right. Touch the man of grief.
Do. Don't be afraid. My troubles are mine
and I am the only man alive who can sustain them.

Enter CREON *from the palace, attended by palace guards.*

LEADER:

Put your requests to Creon. Here he is,
just when we need him. He'll have a plan, he'll act.
Now that he's the sole defense of the country
in your place.

OEDIPUS:

Oh no, what can I say to him?
How can I ever hope to win his trust?
I wronged him so, just now, in every way.
You must see that—I was so wrong, so wrong.

CREON:
I haven't come to mock you, Oedipus,
or to criticize your former failings.

Turning to the guards.

You there,

have you lost all respect for human feelings?
At least revere the Sun, the holy fire
that keeps us all alive. Never expose a thing
of guilt and holy dread so great it appalls
the earth, the rain from heaven, the light of day!
Get him into the halls—quickly as you can.
Piety demands no less. Kindred alone
should see a kinsman's shame. This is obscene.

OEDIPUS:
Please, in god's name . . . you wipe my fears away,
coming so generously to me, the worst of men.
Do one thing more, for your sake, not mine.

CREON:
What do you want? Why so insistent?

OEDIPUS:
Drive me out of the land at once, far from sight,
where I can never hear a human voice.

CREON:
I'd have done that already, I promise you.
First I wanted the god to clarify my duties.

OEDIPUS:
The god? His command was clear, every word:
death for the father-killer, the curse—
he said destroy me!

CREON:
So he did. Still, in such a crisis
it's better to ask precisely what to do.

OEDIPUS:

So miserable—
you would consult the god about a man like me?

CREON:
By all means. And this time, I assume,
even you will obey the god's decrees.

OEDIPUS:

I will,
I will. And you, I command you—I beg you . . .
the woman inside, bury her as you see fit.
It's the only decent thing,
to give your own the last rites. As for me,
never condemn the city of my fathers
to house my body, not while I'm alive, no,
let me live on the mountains, on Cithaeron,
my favorite haunt, I have made it famous.
Mother and father marked out that rock
to be my everlasting tomb—buried alive.
Let me die there, where they tried to kill me.

Oh but this I know: no sickness can destroy me,
nothing can. I would never have been saved
from death—I have been saved
for something great and terrible, something strange.
Well let my destiny come and take me on its way!

About my children, Creon, the boys at least,
don't burden yourself. They're men,
wherever they go, they'll find the means to live.
But my two daughters, my poor helpless girls,
clustering at our table, never without me
hovering near them . . . whatever I touched,
they always had their share. Take care of them,
I beg you. Wait, better—permit me, would you?
Just to touch them with my hands and take
our fill of tears. Please . . . my king.
Grant it, with all your noble heart.
If I could hold them, just once, I'd think
I had them with me, like the early days
when I could see their eyes.

ANTIGONE *and* ISMENE, *two small children, are led in from the palace by a nurse.*

What's that?

O god! Do I really hear you sobbing?—
my two children. Creon, you've pitied me?
Sent me my darling girls, my own flesh and blood!
Am I right?

CREON:

Yes, it's my doing.
I know the joy they gave you all these years,
the joy you must feel now.

OEDIPUS:

Bless you, Creon!
May god watch over you for this kindness,
better than he ever guarded me.

Children, where are you?

Here, come quickly—

Groping for ANTIGONE *and* ISMENE, *who approach their father cautiously, then embrace him.*

Come to these hands of mine,
your brother's hands, your own father's hands
that served his once bright eyes so well—
that made them blind. Seeing nothing, children,
knowing nothing, I became your father,
I fathered you in the soil that gave me life.

How I weep for you—I cannot see you now . . .
just thinking of all your days to come, the bitterness,
the life that rough mankind will thrust upon you.
Where are the public gatherings you can join,
the banquets of the clans? Home you'll come,
in tears, cut off from the sight of it all,
the brilliant rites unfinished.
And when you reach perfection, ripe for marriage,
who will he be, my dear ones? Risking all
to shoulder the curse that weighs down my parents,
yes and you too—that wounds us all together.
What more misery could you want?
Your father killed his father, sowed his mother,
one, one and the selfsame womb sprang you—
he cropped the very roots of his existence.

Such disgrace, and you must bear it all!
Who will marry you then? Not a man on earth.
Your doom is clear: you'll wither away to nothing,
single, without a child.

Turning to CREON.

Oh Creon,
you are the only father they have now . . .
we who brought them into the world
are gone, both gone at a stroke—
Don't let them go begging, abandoned,
women without men. Your own flesh and blood!
Never bring them down to the level of my pains.
Pity them. Look at them, so young, so vulnerable,
shorn of everything—you're their only hope.
Promise me, noble Creon, touch my hand!

Reaching toward CREON, *who draws back.*

You, little ones, if you were old enough
to understand, there is much I'd tell you.
Now, as it is, I'd have you say a prayer.
Pray for life, my children,
live where you are free to grow and season.
Pray god you find a better life than mine,
the father who begot you.

CREON:

Enough.
You've wept enough. Into the palace now.

OEDIPUS:
I must, but I find it very hard.

CREON:
Time is the great healer, you will see.

OEDIPUS:
I am going—you know on what condition?

CREON:
Tell me. I'm listening.

OEDIPUS:
Drive me out of Thebes, in exile.

CREON:
Not I. Only the gods can give you that.

OEDIPUS:
Surely the gods hate me so much—

CREON:
You'll get your wish at once.

OEDIPUS:
You consent?

CREON:
I try to say what I mean; it's my habit.

OEDIPUS:
Then take me away. It's time.

CREON:
Come along, let go of the children.

OEDIPUS:
No—
don't take them away from me, not now! No no no!

Clutching his daughters as the guards wrench them loose and take them through the palace doors.

CREON:
Still the king, the master of all things?
No more: here your power ends.
None of your power follows you through life.

Exit OEDIPUS *and* CREON *to the palace. The* CHORUS *comes forward to address the audience directly.*

CHORUS:

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.
He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Who could behold his greatness without envy?
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.

Exit in procession.



NOTES



PLOT

The plot of Oedipus the King, if reduced to its bare bones, is about the prediction of something unpleasant, the persons concerned try to avoid it and think themselves safe, yet the prediction is fulfilled. Within this simple story Sophocles shapes his material in order to justify the fulfilment of the prediction or, in other words, the development of the action of the play. At the beginning of the play Oedipus is the great king who saved Thebes in the past and is now the city's only hope; he is unchallenged in solving riddles. At the end, he is the miserable, blind, outcast, being the cause of the city's distress, through crimes predicted by Apollo before Oedipus was born.

First we are introduced to the characters in the play : Oedipus, Teiresias, Creon, Jocasta and the two shepherds. The circumstances in which these characters find themselves lead naturally to the following events, or to the development of the action. Oedipus, as we see him, is intelligent, determined, self-tempered and too sure of himself. Oedipus, such being his character, is faced with a chain of circumstances which combine with the strong as well as the weak side of his character to produce the catastrophe. Thus, the insult which Oedipus could not swallow in Corinth, his departure from Corinth, the encounter with Lauis at the cross-road on the way to Dephi, the solution

of the riddle of the Sping, the offering, of the crown of Thebes and the marriage with the queen.

Oedipus was of a great soul and sense of dignity, and because of that he could not swallow the insult at the banquet and left Corinth in order to investigate the truth of the insult directed to him by he friend This self-determination leads to other events; on his way to Delphi to consult the oracle, Oedipus meets with Lauis, his real father. Oedipus, like his father being hot-tempered, the clash occurs and results in the fulfilment of the first part of the oracle Being a man of exceptional intelligence, Oedipus frees Thebes from the tyranny of the Sphinx by solving her riddle as soon as he arrives there. Intelligent as he is, he yet accepts to marry someone old enough to be his mother. Being certain that his mother is back in Corinth, he accepts to marry the queen of Thebes. All the circumstances combine to act and react on Oedipus' character, and thus resulting in a natural and an inevitable way, in the fulfilment of the original oracle.

The dramatic function of the prophecy is to assert that life is not chaotic, that is not ruled by chance and that people must observe the laws made by the gods. Yet, there is no direct intervention on the part of the gods, who only predict, yet knowing that the complexities of human life and the limitations of human knowledge will never prevent man from running to his doom by his free will though having been forewarned.

Sophocles emphasizes the idea of control and certainty, both being an illusion. Lauis, before Oedipus, was warned by the prophecy, he thought himself safe by giving his son away to a shepherd to destroy him. Thus, Lauis thought he took enough control. So did Oedipus, when he left Corinth, being sure that Polybus and Merope were his parents. But their very act of caution help to being about their final doom. On this assumption we can explain the blinding of Oedipus and Jocasta's suicide. Neither has been predicted yet they happens. It is inevitable to Oedipus to do what he has done, and he explains it to the Chorus :

> I will not believe that this was not the best
> That could have been done.

It is inevitable to Oedipus, who possesses such a great soul and a sense of dignity, not to accept his self-made crimes and prefer to live in blindness rather than to die :

> On no man else
> But on me alone is the scourge of my punishment.

So is Jocasta's suicide; although she pretends to be sceptical of the oracle, is horrified at the hearing of the prediction of Teiresias though she tries to conceal her feelings by bidding her

husband to relinquish his quest after truth. Her pretence is disclosed when she comes out with sacrificial offerings and lays them on Apollo's altar, puts fire to incense and prays for deliverance from fear. In the meantime, the messenger from Corinth arrives cheerfully carrying the news that will end everybody's fear: Polybus is dead. But Jocasta has already hanged herself. She realizes her fatal error and, like Oedipus, chooses her own punishment and executes it with her own hands.

OEDIPUS

Oedipus is an Aristotelian tragic hero par excellence. By birth, he is an illustrious man, descendent of a great family; by rank, he is the great king who saves Thebes and who presents for the Thebans the only hope in the world. Inspite of his greatness, he possesses a fatal flaw, which Aristotle calls hamartia. Oedipus sins, unknowingly, through an error of judgement, or rather midjudgement, by an act of certainly. In his complete certainly, he sweeps all aside.

The first scene puts before us a picture of Oedipus as the ideal king, devoted to the welfare of his people. So far, he has been courteous towards Creon. But at the end of the first part of the play, Creon is most unjustly condemned to death or exile by Oedipus. Oedipus the king becomes Oedipus the tyrant and absolute-ruler not regretting for a moment his monstrous error.

In the scene where Teiresias appears on the stage, Oedipus once more exercises his tyranny. Being intelligent, he suspects a collusion between Teiresias and Creon. This conclusion, though it is plausible to Oedipus, is completely wrong. Being too certain of himself, he refuses to listen to Creon's appeal to reason, nor

does he accept to consult the oracle at Delphi. So is Oedipus, the great king, betrayed into behaving like the unjust tyrant by being too confident in his own judgement. This over certainty led him, is the past, to his present doom. He was certain that Polybus and Merope were his parents, and it never occured to him that he might be wrong. He is certain now that Creon is conspiring against him. The earlier certainty betrayed him into disasters of which he had been explicitly forewarned. This one leads him straight to "Pride that breeds the Tyrant." Therefore, at the end, when Oedipus is led into the palace and the children are taken away from his embrace, he protests, and Creon answers him : "Seek not control in all things." This seems to be the end towards which Sophocles has been guiding the events in the play.

The reason of Oedipus' certainly was his high intelligence, the very quality that led him to the fatal misjudgement and ultimately to hybris. Too much intelligence implied, at the time of the Greeks, a denial of the existence of the gods, whose ethical ideal is that of modesty in opposition to self-assertion and pride of life. Although ignorance was considered a vice, the knowledge in question was self-knowledge. Inspite of Oedipus' intelligence and ability to solve riddles, which made him king of Thebes, he lacks self-knowledge and reason which is a fatal error. He came to the throne by virtue of his intelligence or his intellectual power. He reaches the heights of glory and is hailed by the Chorus as a demi-god, yet :

From castled Pride tumbles to the pit,
All footing lost.

CREON

If Oedipus represents impulsiveness, lack of self-knowledge and **hybris**, there is another character, which stands at the other extreme, representing caution, self-knowledge and modesty. Creon's character provides a sharp contrast when compared to that of Oedipus' The contrast between the character of Creon and that of Oedipus is made clear in the scene where Oedipus demands to be driven out of Thebes. Once again Oedipus is quite certain, this time on right judgement, for the god has decreed it and Oedipus himself had already confirmed it. But Creon refuses twice :

OEDIPUS : Cast me out away this instant
Out of this land, out of the sight of man.
CREON : Be sure it would have been done without delay.
But that I await instructions from the god.
OEDIPUS : Is not his instruction already plain ?
CREON : It was so. Yet in the present turn of events
We need more certain guidance.

From this dialogue in this scene, we may safely come to the

conclusion that the contrast between Oedipus and Creon is one of attitudes rather than of persons. Oedipus would not consult Delphi to check his own certainty even though Creon's life depended on it; Creon, though the case is clear, refuses to act, when better authority is available, unil he consults that authority. This contrast of attitudes, between caution and certainty was part of Sophocles' philosophy, and we saw in the first part that certainty led to hybris. Yet, on the other hand Sophocles seems to imply in the play that caution and certainty are an illusion since they could not prevent the fulfiment of the prophecy once with Lauis and then with Oedipus.

TEIRESIAS

There is yet another kind of contrast : in the scene where Teiresias comes on the stage, the contrast between the physical blindness of Teiresias and the actual btindness, in the sense of the eclipse of the inner vision, of Oedipus is made clear. Teiresias stressed the intelligence of the king; being intelligent, Oedipus puts two and two together and suspects a conspiracy against him accusing Teiresias and Creon of it. Teiresias accuses Oedipus of being blind, and he has been so since the beginning. Oedipus' blindness is not a physical blindness, it is rather a blindness of vision resulting from his lack of self-knowledge, rashness and lack of reason and too much certainty. Teiresias, the physically blind priest, has a prophetic vision : he can see the past and the future. His vision, rather than his sight, can pierce through

time, he is, therefore, timeless. This contrast emphasizes the real blindness of Oedipus and calls for our pity, or rather sympathy, for the poor king intelligent as he is, yet lacks the prophetic vision which Teiresias so powerfully possesses. It is only at the end, when Oedipus becomes really and physically blind, that he achieves self-knowledge and can be said to have attained a clear vision.

JOCASTA

Jocasta is another important character in the structure of the play. At the beginning she is the strong, confident, secure Queen; she, like Oedipus, is certain both before and after Teiresias' revelation, still more after it, when she learns that Polybus is dead and that a second prophecy has failed. From this delusion she infers that Chance rules:

> Fear : What has a man to do with fear ?
> Chance rules our lives, and the future is all unknown.
> Best live as best we may, from day to day

This explains why her prayer that the oracle should not be fulfilled, is so terribly answered by the god. If Jocasta is right about what she says, then this would mean that she denies the existence of justice and assets that man's life is ruled by chance, in other words, denying the existence of the gods. Jocasta, being certain that the oracles have failed, allows no place for fore-

thought carefulness or scruple. Sophocles makes it clear throughout the play that life is so vast, complex and uncertain that we only deceive ourselves if we think that we can control it. Life is not random as Jocasta thinks, the gods do exist and their laws do work. In the scene of Jocasta's suicide the hidden power of the gods is revealed She who has been denying the validity of the oracle, or at least pretending, comes out with sacrificial offerings and prays for deliverance; within a few moments after the arrival of the messenger from Corinth, she hangs herself. As if the act of her suicide is the answer of the god to her prayer. By Jocasta's suicide, Sophocles asserts the existence of the gods and denies chance.

THE TWO MESSENGERS

We must contemplate also other characters who form a considerable part of the action of the play : the two messengers. The news that the Corinthian brings is great news indeed, but he has another astonishing news and the moment for producing it soon comes: "No, Polybus is no kin of yours", and when the Theban shepherd is brought in, proclaims Oedipus to be the man "who was that baby." Upon this news Oedipus rushes inside the palace, and then we have the final blinding. The very first act of mercy on the part of the Theban shepherd who handed the baby to the Corinthian shepherd, leads to the final disaster. The other shepherd, too, refuses to kill a baby. This done in

complete innocence and ignorance, helps in bringing about the catastrophe.

The development of action which leads to the final tragic end, is accompanied by what Aristotle terms in his Poetics as "revolution" and "discovery". About "revolution" Aristotle provides the example of the messenger from Corinth who is eager to be the first with the good news, meaning to make Oedipus happy and to free him from the fear he was suffering from by revealing to him the origin of his birth. This produces an effect totally contrary to the intentions of the messenger. This is expressed in Aristotle's words:

> **A revolution is a change into the reverse of what is expected from the circumstances of the action, and that produced... by probable or necessary consequences.(1)**

As for "discovery" Aristotle says:

> **A discovery — as ideed, the word implies — is a change from unknown to known, happening between those characters whose happiness or unhappiness**

1. **Aristotle. Poetries** (trans.) Thomas Twinning (Cairo : Anglo-Egyptian Bookshoop, n.d.), p. 25.

forms the catastrophes of the drama... The best sort of discovery is that which is accompanied by a revolution as in the **Oedipus**.(1)

Oedipus, the detestable truth revealed to him, acts contrary to what is expected. The discovery came too late after the atrocious action has been committed in ignorance. By the act of blinding, the balance between the forces involved in the action is restored and thus producing pity and fear.

THE CHORUS

One of the most important structural principles followed in Greek drama is the chorus. Along with the actors, who were always few in number, there was a group of people known as the chorus, who acted as a sort of guidance to the spectator, commenting on the action of the play, pointing out the significance of what was happening and sometimes taking part in the play. These actors did not perform on the stage, but on a semi-circular space in front of the stage known as the "orchestra", and on which was placed the altar to Dionysus. The chorus accompanied their words with a kind of rhythmical walk, and conveyed thought by physical movements.

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1. Aristotle, **op. cit.**, pp. 25-26.

Sophocles was the first Greek dramatist to concentrate more on the individual character Yet, the chorus performed a very important function ir his drama The chorus in Sophocles' plays was never an obstacle in the way of action, on the contrary, it was of it and it formed an inseparable part of the structure of the play This appears manifest at its best in the scene in which Oedipus explains to Jocasta why he had to kill Lauis. At this point Sophocles means to put in a sense of irony regarding Jocasta's statement that the actual murder of Lauis did not agree with the oracle. This sense of irony is repeated when the Corinthian messenger proclaims the news of Oedipus' origin of birth. The chorus hails Oedipus as being the son of chance begotten by a god from some mountain-nymph. The chorus does this in dance and song, upon which enters the Theban shepherd with the news that Oedipus is no son of chance but of Lauis and Jocasts. This sense of irony which the chorus provides by the dance and the song, is so powerfully shaken by the entrance of the shepherd.

The comments of the chorus on present events reveal the true mind of the Athenians. The identification of the individual citizen with the corporate life, which freed him from the narrow cricle of personal interests into a sphere of wider views and higher aims, was embodied in the chorus. In **Oedipus the King**, the chorus represents the Thebans, and whatever the chorus says whether commenting or otherwise, it expresses the e no-tions of Oedipus' subjects. It was they who crowned him king.

and it was they who glorified him to the extent of considering him a demi-god; it was they also who deserted him at the end having broken the laws of the gods by bursting out in tyrannical pride. Being law-abiding citizens, the chorus must shun Oedipus and accept his own judgement to be exiled.

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